



CARRY

Jacqueline Druza

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By Jacqueline Druga

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As a special treat, a link is provided at the end of the novel that will take you to the Short Film, CRY, available on Youtube.

1. August 15th

It was his turn to go.

Forty-three days since it all started, and they were hitting the bottom of the barrel with supplies.

Randy didn't mind going. In fact, he preferred to be the one. He was faster and more agile than Grant, who was pushing sixty.

Grant made the first trip out. They were good for a while, but as time moved on and nothing changed, the supplies dwindled.

A week beforehand, Grant went out. He returned with little news and lack of hope.

What was out there?

Randy was about to find out.

It had been almost two weeks since he stepped outside, felt the sun, or breathed in fresh air.

He couldn't take the car; everything had to be done on foot.

No weapons were needed; the best line of defense was silence.

Complete and utter silence.

Randy had to be quiet.

The small farming town of Finleyville was thirty miles south of the city, isolated and surrounded by the hills of farmland. Grant's wood frame house was three blocks from the main hub of the quaint town.

That's where Randy would head for supplies, the small town street; if he couldn't find what he needed there, he would hit the large farm.

Leaving Grant's house, he cringed on every creak of the floorboard, opened the door silently, and shielded his eyes.

The bright sun caused a piercing pain in his eyes; it was too bright to see anything. Randy's tall figure crouched on the porch of the house as he blinked and stared downward, allowing his eyes to adjust.

He was anxious.

But he could do it. He was always an athletic man, played baseball in his teens and twenties. Moved into deck hockey and softball in his thirties, and after a few years' break, getting pudgy around the middle and fearing a mid-forties heart attack, Randy took up running. It helped when his wife up and left.

He'd be lying if he said he didn't constantly think of his adult children. He hoped they were okay, but as much as he wanted to search them out, he couldn't. Searching for them would put not only himself at risk, but them, as well. Especially if they were hidden and quiet, because if they were, they were safe.

After several minutes, Randy's eyes adjusted, and he stood.

It was quiet. Not a single sound. No electrical hums, no motor noises, nothing.

So quiet that a ringing started in his ears, and he knew that his own footsteps would sound like thunder.

But he started to run, staying close to houses, on the brown grass and away from any hard surface.

During his short run to the main street, Randy didn't see a soul. He didn't know if they were alive and safe, or dead.

No movement, no sound.

If people were alive, he envisioned them hiding, cringing at the sounds of his footsteps.

No one needed noise.

That probably was his imagination.

A thick new layer of dust covered everything. It was like a blanket of snow. He paused to touch it. It was fine, granular, like sand, and exceedingly white. It reflected the sun.

It was everywhere. On the roads, grass, and cars that had been abandoned.

He hit the main street and looked to the sky. It was clear, no noise. The largest farm in the country was only another quarter mile away; if need be, Randy would go there for some things. But with the blanket of dust, he couldn't imagine anything survived.

Roy's by the Tracks was the local drinking hole; everyone went there. Randy paused at the front window. It was boarded up.

He needed a drink and thought that he'd stop by Roy's on the way back to Grant's if he got the supplies quickly. He'd grab a bottle, something to tide him over. After all, one of his last conversations with the old timer Roy was that the doors would remain open. Whether he was selling or not remained to be seen, but the doors would remain open.

When did he board up the windows?

Something like that surely would have been heard.

Stork's Market was across the street from Roy's. The windows were intact, not boarded, and a handwritten sign hung on the door that read: "Take only what you need, please. No hoarding."

The people of Finleyville may have been out of touch with the rest of the world, but they were staunch community people. They thought of each other and helped each other. Randy was sure they heeded Mr. Stork's request. After all, other than the Bilks Farm general store, the nearest grocer was five miles away. And the situation at hand wasn't typical.

The glass door was ajar, and the store smelled of must and moldy food.

Food went bad when the power went out.

There was a lot of bottled water remaining. It looked as if Stork moved it to the front of the store. Actually a lot of items were moved to the front of the store.

Water was too heavy to carry. He couldn't take that. Besides, Grant, like most people in Finleyville, had a well, so water wasn't a problem. Food was.

The shelves were depleted but not totally bare.

Strapped over his shoulder was an empty duffle bag. Randy was strong enough to carry a lot of things, but he would do as the sign asked, only take what he needed. He pulled the bag forward and prepared to fill it.

Grant had instructed him to take only seven days' worth of food. If everyone went to the store and took only small amounts, the supplies would last.

Randy made his rounds.

Six mouths to feed.

There were more at one time ... actually there were a lot more people everywhere at one time.

He grabbed what he needed. Just as he finished, he heard a can drop to the floor and roll.

Randy stopped moving. He held his breath, shifting his eyes around. He waited, watched, and listened.

Nothing.

There was probably someone else in the store. Randy didn't bother looking or calling out; he just took what he had and left.

Roy's.

Just a drink, maybe a bottle to take with him. Grant wasn't a big drinker, but his wife was. Rita was a tough cookie, over ten years older than Grant. She was a nightly fixture at Roy's and had her own stash at the house.

A stash she didn't share.

Randy was surprised she shared her home with those who took shelter there.

That was due to Grant.

He was good people.

Duffle shouldered, Randy made his way into Roy's. The door was unlocked, and it didn't creak or squeak when Randy walked in.

Not a soul was in there, not that Randy expected there to be.

He soundlessly lowered his bag to the floor. "The Tracks" had been around for decades, before Randy moved to town. It belonged to Roy's father and then Roy. The building was old, one of the original buildings when they built the town. It was a home for orphans just after the Civil War; in the early 1900s, during Prohibition, it was a speakeasy, then eventually a brothel before Roy's family purchased it.

There was one other drinking establishment in town, but everyone preferred Roy's. All types of people went there. Bikers, rednecks, blue-collar workers, and business commuters.

No one judged anyone.

Roy was the best. Rough and tough in his mid-seventies, he understood that times were lean and gave credit to people so they could enjoy their

beverage even if they were broke.

It was the place everyone went to when things started happening. When people could still go outside, they went there for information. It was the hub. Folks would exchange information, post messages on the board inside, and talk.

Until, that was, they learned there wasn't always safety in large numbers.

Randy was ready for that drink. He slipped behind the bar, found a fresh bottle, poured a shot of whiskey, and downed it.

Then he poured another.

He turned his head at the soft scuff of a foot.

Roy stepped through the kitchen door. He didn't quite look his age but was getting there. A heavysset man with a bum leg from the war, he shaved his head instead of sporting the gray grandpa ring around his head.

Roy wore a blue mask over his mouth, the type painters wore. As he set an additional mask on the bar surface, he nodded, lifted his own mask to his forehead, and slid a glass to Randy, speaking softly. "I'll join ya. Put that on when you leave. It'll filter the dust out there. You don't need to get a cough from it."

"Thanks," Randy said.

Roy took his drink. "Ya know, people say that dust keeps showing up as a means to call us out."

Randy squinted as he tilted his head. "What? What do you mean?"

"Cause allergies, asthma, coughing ..."

"Noise."

Roy nodded.

"So you've seen others?" Randy asked.

"Daily. They go get some canned food, slip in here for a drink, then head out. Though ..." Roy sighed and pointed to the board. "Nothing's been posted since ... well ... since."

Randy closed his eyes.

"Bilks Farm will open their doors when the market is empty. He said two weeks they'll have bushels in the greenhouses."

"Good to know."

"Spreading the word." Roy said.

"Is that what brings you here?"

"It's my place. My business. I'm here every day." Roy finished his drink. "Just one more, then you can take that bottle with you."

"Appreciate it." Randy refreshed him.

"Figure Rita don't share." Roy smiled.

"No, she doesn't." Randy splashed some whiskey in his glass. "Gonna head out after this."

"Good idea. It's been close to a week, so you know another is coming."

"Yeah, I do. We all do. But we needed supplies."

Roy raised his glass to Randy. "Here's the to the end of the world."

Randy paused before clinking glasses. “Is it? Do you seriously think it is?”

“Yeah, I do, my friend. Sadly. At least the end of *our* world.”

Both men clinked their glasses and then downed their drinks.

2. July 5th

TWO MONTHS EARLIER

The three-day holiday weekend was over. The next day people would return to work and return to the long commute. Randy was still relatively new to the commute into the city and hadn't yet figured out the patterns in conjunction to seasons and holidays.

All he knew was that he had to be up at five a.m., out the door by six, and as it pushed one o'clock, sleep seemed far away.

Several factors played into that.

It was hot. Humid and hot, the heat index of the day pushed over a hundred. While Randy loved the apartment located in a renovated elementary school, it didn't have vents for central air. The wall unit just wasn't cutting it.

He wished it would rain.

It felt as if it would, and sounded like it, as well.

Booming thunder echoed in his high-ceilinged home, drowning out the white noise of the air conditioning.

Just as the effects of his last drink hit him, his eyes felt heavy, and Randy was jolted awake by the triple boom.

What the hell? He thought. It sounded like a war zone.

His room lit up with flashes of lightning, colors like he had never seen.

The electrical storm grew worse, and Randy got out of bed.

He scuffled across the hardwood floors and paused to look out the huge window. The sky illuminated as if hidden fireworks ignited. Red, blue, green.

And if all that wasn't enough, the worst, the biggest culprit of his lack of sleep was his phone.

It beeped again with another message.

Randy knew whom it was from; at least fifty had come in from her. He wanted to ignore them; he knew where they were going. But like a train wreck, he couldn't help but look. In an emotionally masochistic act, he lifted the phone and read the message from his ex-wife.

"And I can't believe how bad it hurts."

Randy closed his eyes and downed his drink. Really? She couldn't believe how bad it hurt? His wife of twenty-three years, his high school sweetheart, she'd up and left him for a much younger man. Randy was torn apart; he thought he'd die emotionally. And there she was, the ex, on the heels of her latest breakup, running to Randy with her pain.

She couldn't believe how bad it hurt.

Randy could tell her, because he knew. He wanted to send her a message telling her, good. Feel the pain, drown in it. I hope you suffer.

But he didn't.

He simply responded, "I know. Sorry you're hurt."

Cringing, he lay down the phone. What was wrong with him? Why was he still being so nice to her?

Beep.

"Thank you. Can I call you tomorrow?" She wrote.

Randy grumbled, pouring another drink. He wanted to tell her no. It would have been easy to write those two letters. He actually debated about it, but instead, typed in the word "sure" and pressed send.

It spooled and then stopped.

Oddly, he got an error message saying the message could not be sent. Just as he was going to try again, he noticed that he didn't have a signal.

Not a signal at all.

Perhaps it was a blessing in disguise. Randy lay down the phone. The room lit up again, and seconds later, the thunder crashed.

He walked into the next room, figured he'd watch television, fall asleep there.

As he sat in his chair, he grabbed the remote, but when the television came on, he saw he had no cable signal.

No cable.

Deducting the brewing storm had something to do with everything being out, Randy opted for a movie in his player, a boring one.

He hoped it would put him to sleep.

Eventually, his heavy burden of emotions and the drinking outweighed the noise and the heat, and he fell asleep.

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In a drunken slur, Rita Mason cried out, "You never loved me!" The petite older woman pushed open the screen door, stomped across the white porch, and fell down the three steps.

Here we go again, Grant Mason thought. With a shake of his head, he followed her out, wearing only his pajama bottoms.

Rita had drunk herself into another stupor.

Her summer dress was caught up in the back, tucked into her underwear, and Rita stumbled to stand.

"Did you break a hip?" Grant asked sarcastically.

"F.... F... screw you," She swung out her arm, holding a bottle. "I'm heading to Roy's."

Grant looked down at his watch. It was just after one, and Roy's would still be open. He was always open until two, no matter how many people were there, if any.

Rita stood and staggered into the grass. She paused when the sky blasted light and sound.

“A storm is coming,” Grant said. “You don’t want to walk there.”

“How do you know what I want? You don’t ... you don’t know me.”

Thinking, “Yeah, yeah”, Grant gave another shake of his head. He was pretty sure he knew her after thirty years of marriage. He was certain Rita would have woken everyone in a mile radius if it weren’t for the electrical storm.

“Rita, get in the house.” Grant told her.

She ignored him and kept walking.

Grant would follow her, pajamas and all. He didn’t want the sheriff to grab her again. The only thing that worked in their favor was that when Rita got into one of those drunken episodes, they let her go because she was in her seventies.

He was younger than she was, and when Grant met Rita, he had jet-black hair. He was handsome and fit. He helped his father run the plumbing store. Rita was a thrice-divorced woman who hung out at Roy’s every night.

She was feisty and fun and never a dull moment.

Never a mean drunk, always the party girl, until her son Bill died in an accident eight years earlier, and all that changed.

Grant’s jet-black hair turned white after Bill’s death.

Anything set off Rita. Anything made her drink to oblivion and get angry. On this night, it was her addiction to infomercials, and Rita was watching a doozy on abused puppies.

The more she watched the same infomercial, the more she drank. She had called Brad, their only son together, four times to see if he was watching the abused puppies.

Then the cable went out, and the phone died. Rita was convinced it was because Grant turned off the television and that Brad ignored her.

The landline worked, she stated, so why didn’t Brad’s cell phone?

That was when she got the bright idea to go to Roy’s.

“He’ll have that puppy show, he has that big dish on the roof,” she said.

“The electrical storm knocked everything out.” Grant tried to reason with her, but she didn’t listen.

Rita argued, spat her spiteful remarks, did a piss-poor job of putting on some makeup, and stormed from the house. Grant knew the next day when she sobered up she’d show remorse. However, while she was drunk, she was on a mission.

The Mason home was the end property on a triple lot, and Rita had a heck of a walk in her state.

Grant stayed behind her, watching.

She swayed left to right, tripping here and there.

He figured he’d let her go. She’d make it to Roy’s and pass out at the bar, or she’d fall and pass out en route.

Either way, it wouldn't take long, and Grant would be able to get some peace.

That was if the loud storm ever let up.

3. JULY 5th

Randy didn't wake up until a few minutes after six. Having slept in his chair, he hadn't set an alarm. After looking at his watch, he jumped up, threw on a pot of coffee, and grabbed his phone to let the office know he was going to be late.

He still didn't have a signal. His landline wasn't a true landline, coming through his cable provider.

He knew the second he lifted the phone that the cable was out.

He didn't have time to worry about it. After quickly showering and pouring a cup of coffee to go, Randy was out the door.

There was usually a lot more traffic on the street. Randy chalked the lack of activity up to the holiday and, possibly, people taking vacations.

It was a particularly odd overcast day. It looked like one giant cloud covered the sky, and it seemed more like the evening than morning.

For as dark as it was, the streetlights failed to come on. That was Randy's first sign that something bigger was wrong.

The storm that occurred the night before had really done some damage.

He drove over to the main road. About a mile farther, at the first intersection, traffic was a little backed up. Not much, a few cars, and Randy saw the reason. There was a four-car accident blocking the road.

Where were the police?

He sipped his coffee, hoping people would just go around. "Come on," he thought. "Don't be a rubbernecker; go around, the light is green."

He thought it, but traffic didn't move.

After a few moments, cars moved slowly, each at the four-way intersection taking its turn.

That was when Randy noticed that the light was still green.

It never changed. In fact, all the lights at the intersection were green.

A block down the road, he saw what added to the traffic. At the gas station, cars were lined up at the pumps, spilling traffic into the street.

It was then Randy reached for the radio. Was there a disaster? A terror hit, act of war?

But he received no answers there either. Despite trying every station, AM and FM, all Randy got was dead air.

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It wasn't a morning out of the norm for Grant, with the exception that he hadn't gotten the amount of sleep he would have liked. Fortunately, Rita

stumbled and passed out on the flower bed before she even hit another street. She was thin and easy to carry, so Grant took her back to the house, leaving her to slumber on the front room couch.

She was still sleeping, and it would be a while before she woke. Actually, Grant would probably be finished for the day. He had only three plumbing stops, the first of which wasn't until later.

He figured since he was up, he'd go to the shop, get the items that he needed, and treat himself to a breakfast platter at Freddy's.

Grant wasn't a man of technology. He didn't watch television, use the internet, or even mess with a cell phone.

He got dressed, got in the truck and headed to the shop.

He'd never had an issue with traffic; he didn't notice if it was light or not. The shop was a few blocks from the house. He just drove there.

Unlike everyone else in his small town, Grant was unaffected by the current state of events, and he didn't notice that somehow, sometime during the course of the night, a lot of technology just shut down.

He didn't notice or care; he just went about his day.

Eventually, though, it would catch up to him because it was rippling through everyone around him.

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Randy's route was almost straight ahead. He lived three miles from the town of Finleyville and twenty-seven from the city. He took a two-lane main road for fifteen miles and the rest on a four-lane.

But he didn't make it far.

Aside from the traffic accidents, the backed up gas stations, and the stoplights that didn't work, Randy didn't even get close to the four-lane road.

About two miles from there, an odd steady flow of traffic headed back.

Cars rarely appeared in that lane during the morning rush hour.

He noticed several drivers giving a wave signal for those in traffic to turn around.

Randy was at a dead stop. He hadn't moved for more than fifteen minutes, and he put the car in park.

He didn't know why he kept heading to work; his job as an insurance man wasn't very exciting or urgent, but it was all he had.

Eventually he opened his car door and stepped out.

Hands on his hips, he tried to flag down cars, but no one even bothered to acknowledge him. Then one man slowed down and stopped.

"Thanks for stopping," Randy said. "Was there an accident?"

"No," the man answered. "I just turned around. Saw Run is closed."

Randy cocked back. "Closed?"

“All four lanes, outbound only.”

At that point, cars behind the man started beeping, and Randy held up his hands. *Outbound only? From the city?* “What happened?”

“I don’t know anything, no one is saying ... No radio. No phones. I’m heading home; something big happened. ’Cause all the cars on Saw Run headed out sure looks like an exodus to me.”

Randy nodded and stepped back. “Thanks.”

The man drove off, wishing Randy luck.

Slowly Randy got back into his car. No radio, no cable, no phone or traffic lights. He thought hard; it had to be a communication breakdown, a satellite or computer. Both. Something. But why evacuate the city?

Randy wasn’t getting any answers sitting in a long line of traffic. He saw his own opportunity and turned the car around.

Like the stranger who stopped to talk to him, Randy was heading home.

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The handwritten piece of paper taped to the front door of Freddy’s said “Cash Only”. Grant didn’t think much of it; their credit card machines had gone down before, so that didn’t bother him. What did bother him was the number of people there on a weekday morning.

“The ATM was down; can I write a check?” a customer asked.

“Sorry, cash only.”

People talked; their voices meshed. Cash only; didn’t they read the sign? Grant took a seat at the counter and turned over his cup, the signal that he wanted coffee.

It was packed. People stood, waiting for a table. He didn’t understand; there were still two seats at the counter. Nothing wrong with that.

Freddy’s wasn’t all that big of a diner, yet people were waiting in line? Did he miss a special on the board?

Yvonne had worked there for as long as Grant could remember and as long as he’d been coming there. She poured his coffee. “Be with you in a second, Grant. Cash only today.”

“I read the sign. I always use cash, anyway.” Grant reached for his cup. “Say Von, what the heck is going on? You giving food away today?”

She smiled. “Aren’t you funny?”

Thinking, “No, really, I’m not,” Grant lifted his cup. Out of habit, he raised his eyes to the television but saw only a blue screen. No signal.

The cable was still out from the storm. He took a sip, shifted his eyes to the newsstand, but there wasn’t a paper. In fact, no one had a newspaper.

With a crinkled brow, he examined the patrons. Charlie wasn’t here, Roy either. None of the regulars.

Yvonne returned, speaking quickly. “Hey, Grant, they’re gonna 86 the eggs and sausages so I put the Hungry He-Man Special in for you since you usually get that. Don’t want a regular to go without.”

“Thanks, appreciate it. Are you the only one working?”

“Yep. Not that the money matters.” Yvonne scurried away.

He heard her blast someone to “hold their horses,” and Grant felt sorry for her. It was crazy in Freddy’s, loud and out of control.

Through the meshed together voices, Grant picked up the words “sneak attack”, and that was the point when Grant zoomed in on the voices around him.

“Yeah, well, you know, they said a cyber terror hit would be the worst kind.”

“Bet it’s the sun. It was doing those flares.”

“A flare could have knocked out the satellites.”

“Would we still have power if the satellites were gone?”

“It’s some sort of computer virus.”

“Heard they shut down the city.”

“Pete said they were moving everyone out.”

“Was the city hit with something?”

“Saw Run is closed. Outbound only.”

“Can’t get close enough to the city to find out.”

“Anyone tried a landline?”

“Nothing on the radio.”

“Is it just here or everywhere?”

“Damn digital converters. Hope someone thinks about taking it back to analog. Use the towers the way they did years ago.”

“Landline only works to another landline. A lot of people get their phones through the cable. That’s out.”

“Yeah, but who in the hell has an antenna to see the local stations.”

“Outbound only? Everyone in the city? Moving them out?”

“Heard traffic was backed up.”

“Moving them to where?”

Yvonne set a plate before Grant, taking him away from his intense eavesdropping. He had missed a lot. His mind swarmed with questions because it was new to him. Obviously, those in the diner had seen, heard, or experienced something that Grant hadn’t.

“Hey, everyone, something is coming on.” Freddy, in his dirty cook outfit, reached up to the television. The blue screen indicating no signal flashed to white static. “I disconnected the cable,” he announced. The screen flickered a few more times before the ever-familiar single tone of the Emergency Broadcast System blared.

A black screen with the words, “Announcement imminent, tune in FEMA station AM 980” followed the tone.

It was if the message said, “*Everyone run,*” because at that second,

people fled the diner in a rush. Some threw money on the counter; some didn't. They all mobbed the door in an attempt to leave, to get to the radio, and listen.

Grant looked left to right, watching panicked people leave.

Did they honestly think if they didn't get to their cars or home they'd miss it?

Grant had a good seat and was pretty darn sure Freddy was going to put that station on. If he left, he stood a chance of not hearing anything. Then he'd have to go home and face Rita with no news.

Then again, Rita was passed out and would be for a while.

Grant was already in the dark; what were a few more minutes?

Grant enjoyed his breakfast in the suddenly empty diner with a hot plate of food in front of him as he waited for Freddy to tune in the station.

4.

Randy was a mess. Typically cool and calm, he had a hard time containing the myriad emotions that swept through him.

The farther the morning moved on, the bigger the lines were to the gas stations. ATMs were down, and Randy still had hours before the banks opened--if they even did.

He had about thirty dollars in cash in the coffee can on top of his fridge, and that was it.

Would anything open? That remained to be seen because no one really could figure out what was going on.

Years beforehand, Randy had joked during a cocktail party that one day, everyone was going to regret removing the pay phones.

They laughed at him.

No one was laughing anymore.

A pay phone didn't need a computer. Randy racked his brain trying to think of where there was one.

The park.

He recalled that when he jogged in the park, he saw a pay phone. The park was on his way home, so Randy made a beeline there.

Traffic was steady, possibly commuters returning home after a futile attempt to get downtown. Not many turned around in that line of traffic. Randy was glad he did.

When he arrived at the pay phone, he saw he wasn't alone in his way of thinking.

At least twenty people waited for a turn.

But who would he call? Who had a landline and not a cell phone? He figured that while he was waiting in line, he'd go through his contacts in his phone to determine which person he could call. He needed to talk to someone to check on his kids, his ex-wife, more so to find out what the hell was happening.

He expected people to get edgy while waiting in line, but they didn't. Each person was concerned, curious as to whether the caller ahead found out anything.

Each would leave the phone booth, shaking his head.

"No answer."

"Straight to voicemail."

"He didn't know anything."

Someone somehow had to find out something.

And then ... someone did.

The young man hung up the phone and burst from the booth, shouting out, "There's gonna be a radio announcement any minute. FEMA has a

special AM station.”

Randy, like others, left the line and went to his car.

He had three cigarettes remaining; he lit one of them.

It took a few minutes, and then the announcement came over the radio. The voice was human, almost robotic in the detached way he delivered the report. He paused in reading almost as if he were reading from a ticker tape.

“There has been a global event. All ... citizens are urged ... to stay in their homes. Further details ... are forthcoming. If you live within a major city ... evacuations are necessary. Government busses ... are available. If you cannot leave on your own ... place a white flag or cloth where officials ... can see it. If you live in outlying areas If you can take in refugees during the crisis, place a red flag or cloth where it will be visible. Repeat, a global event has occurred. This is a level five emergency.”

And then there was nothing but a computerized voice stating the message would repeat in thirty minutes.

“What the fuck is a level five emergency?” A man shouted.

Randy didn’t have a clue. The message from FEMA was incomplete and vague, but it said two things. Global event and stay inside.

Randy closed his car door and headed home.

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There was no way that Randy would put himself in the survivor category. Anytime in his life that the subject “End of the World” came up, Randy never thought about what he’d do or how he’d survive; in his mind, he just wouldn’t.

Nuclear war ... he worked in the city; he’d be dust. Terror attack, same thing. Biological weapon, he always figured he’d be the first infected since he caught every cold and bug that circulated. God’s end? He wasn’t pure, and he’d burn in hell because he probably would give the Antichrist the benefit of the doubt of not being a bad guy.

Zombie attack. Randy didn’t believe that would occur, so if a zombie headed his way, he’d surely be a meal.

Knowing in his mind and in his heart he’d never see the world’s end, he somehow was faced with a global event, and suddenly Randy was thinking about how he was going to survive.

It wasn’t going to be a long-term event; it couldn’t be.

The average person had more survival knowledge than Randy. He just didn’t want to learn it. He never held a gun or even saw a gun.

Food came from a store and water from a tap. It would always be there.

Of course, he was resourceful, so he had that in his favor.

He went to his apartment, and the older woman down the hall stopped

him.

“Did you hear?” she asked, almost panicked. “Some sort of global problem. What do you think it is?”

“I ... I don’t know.” Randy said. “I haven’t a clue.”

“We’ll be okay, right?”

“I ... don’t know.” Randy walked away.

Perhaps he could have been more reassuring; after all, she lived alone, was elderly and scared. But Randy didn’t know what to tell her; he didn’t even know what to think himself.

No phone, no internet, FEMA was stepping in; to Randy, it meant it wasn’t going to be long before the power went out.

He worried less about fire from the sky, earthquakes, and war; he worried more about what people would do.

Shelter. Food. Water. Protection. Maybe medical supplies.

He had to retrieve what he had in his apartment.

He locked his door, not that it made that much of a difference, and tried to collect his thoughts.

Hanging on the wall above the bookshelf was his College World Series MVP bat. It wasn’t much, but it was some protection.

He checked that off his mental list as he grabbed it from the brackets.

A part of Randy just wanted to reject the warnings, believe that they were precautionary and everything would be okay. That even if it weren’t, surely the government would have specific places set up to help people.

He wondered how many people actually were thinking that way, and Randy had to stop.

For the first time in a long time, he had to think worst-case scenarios. With the government stepping in, with a classified global event and cities evacuated, chances were it was a worst-case scenario, and Randy knew he needed water and food to survive.

Probably one of the few people who didn’t buy bottled water, Randy searched out the recycle bin and pulled out the plastic milk and soda jugs.

Immediately he rinsed and started to fill them.

His food situation was pathetic.

He was a bachelor; he shopped when he needed and as he cooked. His cupboards were bare. All he had were a few cans, half of a box of cereal, some butter, an onion and a frozen pack of hot dogs.

Then again, there were numerous take-out containers in the fridge, and old pizza.

After filling the containers with water, Randy grabbed his mad money from the coffee can.

If the gas stations were any indication of how the grocery stores would be, Randy was in trouble. However, it was something he had to do, and fast.

Grant made just one stop after finishing his breakfast, at Art's Hardware store. Another handwritten sign informed people that purchases were cash only probably was the obstacle that kept the crowds away.

There were quite a few people in the store; most were grabbing batteries, flashlights, stuff like that. Grant didn't need those; he had those items. What he needed were chains and locks.

Art was behind the counter when Grant walked in. He started to say, "Cash only," but only the word "cash" emerged when he saw it was Grant.

Most people knew Grant only used cash. Kathy at the bank always let him know when his deposits cleared; then Grant withdrew his funds. He preferred it that way. It wasn't that he didn't trust banks, but there were two reasons. First, he didn't trust himself. He used to have constant overdrawn syndrome. Bad in math. Since he operated his life on cash, he didn't have problems; when he was out of money, he was out.

The second reason was the same reason he didn't need anything from the store other than those chains and locks.

Tornadoes ripped through his home when he lived in Oklahoma. Decades earlier, not far from Finleyville, a freak tornado struck, causing sequential micro-storms that wiped out power and water for almost a week. Stores operated on a cash-only basis, and the banks couldn't operate at all.

Since then, Grant played it safe.

He was glad he did.

A guy at Freddy's told him that people were fighting at the gas pumps. Grant didn't understand that. Where were these people going that they had to fill their tanks? Especially thirty miles from a city being evacuated.

Common sense told Grant that with the exodus not only in the nearby city but all over, and the event being labeled global, along with emergency radio, things were going to get out of control.

A natural disaster or act of war didn't need to strike; technology had shut down. No cell phones, no cable, no internet, no computer networks.

That alone was enough.

People were going to panic. They'd scramble and hoard whatever they could and maybe get violent.

Grant had all he needed. He never boasted or bragged about it; he just bought the locks and chains.

He didn't even go into the house when he arrived home. He quickly locked the two water pumps outside.

He then placed a chain and lock on his shed where he kept the riding lawn mower, extra fuel, and Bill's old motorcycle. After doing that, he went inside. And for the first time in twenty years, he locked the front door.

Rita was still sound asleep on the couch. Grant chuckled at her loud

snoring. He thought about waking her, but chose not to. With so much still to do, Rita and her questions were the last things he wanted to deal with.

Passing through the living room, Grant was surprised that the jingling bag of chains didn't wake Rita. He paused and opened the locked cabinet in the dining area. Grant had made the beautiful oak cabinet and stored four rifles in it. He removed one, shut the cabinet, opened the drawer, and loaded his weapon.

He was being safe rather than sorry.

On the table was a notepad; his "to do" list for the week was jotted on there. Grant ripped off the top sheet.

Bag in one hand, rifle slung over his shoulder, Grant took his note pad into the kitchen.

He planned to open every cabinet, including the pantry and fridge, and inventory what they had. After that, he'd take the chains, go to the basement, and secure the cold cellar door.

When he was finished, and only after he was finished with all that, then he'd wake Rita.

To Grant, dealing with the breakdown of society was a heck of a lot easier than explaining society's collapse to a hung-over wife.

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Randy felt guilty and even backtracked to return to his apartment building to ask Mrs. Roseman, the elderly woman down the hall, if she needed anything.

She was fine; she told him she had gone grocery shopping for the month when she received her Social Security a few days earlier. After they discussed that nothing new had come over the radio, Randy left for the store.

He wanted to walk, but the three-mile jaunt to the store was too far to carry what few groceries he'd get with his thirty-two dollars.

As he pulled from his street onto the main road, he saw a blue school bus parked in front of St. Joan's. People carrying bags were filing from the bus and walking into the church. He wondered briefly about that and continued on.

It took only a few minutes to get to the parking lot of Stork's Market. It was located on the side of the building, and the lot was packed.

A small line of people maybe ten deep stood outside waiting, and it appeared that two good old local boys bearing hunting rifles held post at the doors.

As soon as he got into line, the woman in front of him turned and said, "They're only taking cash, no checks."

Randy nodded. "Why the line? Is it that busy?"

“Only two workers, so they’re only letting twenty people in at a time. Checking for your cash first. There was a fight here about an hour ago, that’s what I heard.”

Another nod and Randy said, “Thanks.”

The line moved when two people left the store.

In fact, the line moved quickly. Randy didn’t spot a person who had an overfilled cart. He never really gave a thought until that very moment as to how many people really didn’t carry cash.

He felt a tap on his shoulder and peered behind him.

“Why the line?” an older man asked.

“Only two workers and they’re only letting twenty in at a time. Line is moving, though.” It was then that Randy noticed a few more people showing up.

“Good thing we got here early then,” the man said. “Later on this place will be busy. Volunteer fire department is cashing checks for up to fifty bucks at two o’clock. Taking it from the bingo fund.”

“Thank you, that’s good to know.”

“Also, First Baptist is giving juice and milk to the elderly and those with kids.”

“Thanks,” Randy said, as his eyes shifted to another blue school bus. This one rolled on by heading south on the main road.

“Refugees from the city,” the man behind told him. “Third bus I saw. Been evacuating people since six this morning.”

“How do you know?”

“I talked to my sister this morning when they were moving her out. She has a house phone. Although she still hasn’t shown up at my place yet. Told her to come to my house.”

“Did they say why?” Randy asked.

“I guess traffic, I don’t know. The cell phones don’t work.”

“No.” Randy shook his head with a chuckle. “I mean, did she say why they were evacuating?”

The man shrugged. “Some sort of imminent attack is coming. Started last night. They’re saying those lights in the sky weren’t lightning.”

“Who is saying?”

“Rumors, people. It’s what my sister heard from the soldiers when they knocked on her door.”

For some reason, Randy was shocked. Had society already resorted to word of mouth? “Holy shit. An attack. From who?”

Before Randy could get his answer, the guard on the left told Randy he could go into the store. Randy stepped forward, showed his money, and then proceeded inside.

It was a crazy feeling, but Randy felt lost. He always went to the store, but this time was different. All of a sudden, he wasn’t shopping for dinner; he was shopping to live. He had to think ahead. The store was empty; then again,

they were only letting twenty people in. There were signs written on poster boards, the first of which read, “We are a community. Get only what you need.”

The second sign was better. A display was set up next to the bananas in the produce department. Written in blue magic marker, the sign read, “These are your best bets!”

Now, Randy knew he wasn’t the survival type, and the folks that ran the store were good. They thought about people like Randy who would just run into the store without thinking, grabbing what they thought they needed. Or perhaps they weren’t thinking about those who didn’t know and rather more about those who would hoard and take more than they needed.

The display was simple. Water. Dehydrated milk, canned items, aspirin, beans, rice, oats, and a few other things. Randy made a mental note; that was what he would get.

He counted in his head as he moved around the store. The fresh meats were marked down drastically. He grabbed a package of steaks. If everything was going to go to hell, he figured he might as well splurge on one last meal.

Besides, he planned on hitting the fire department to cash a check, so that low-cost pack of steak wasn’t a bad idea.

He could always return to the store.

Collecting items that were on the display, along with his steaks, Randy kept a running tally and knew he was close to his limit.

He didn’t have much. He would have to make what he bought today and already had in his cupboard last him. He hadn’t a clue how long the crisis would continue.

There wasn’t too much of a wait. The checkout lady, Millie, moved people through. She was always so friendly and polite every time Randy saw her. Always called him “Mr. Baker”, a name she grabbed from looking at his super saver card. Most impressively, even during the current crisis, she smiled and kept her cool. A short, stout woman in her late thirties, her dark hair styled in a short, sassy manner, her face was always perfectly made up. Never too much, just right. There was never a time when Randy went into the store that he didn’t find her a pleasure to look at, and this day she was even more of a godsend because she didn’t seem fazed at all. Millie was the same as she was every day, no different.

“Hey, there,” she said with a smile. “How you holding up?”

“As well as everyone,” Randy replied. “I suppose. How’d you end up working when everyone else isn’t?”

She shrugged with a smile. “My uncle owns the store.”

Randy gave an up of his head to her register. “I see your computer is working?”

“It’s in house, it’s fine.” She swiped his items over the scanner, bagging them immediately. “I’m supposed to make sure people don’t overbuy. You’re not getting much. Stocked up at home?”

“Not much cash,” he said.

“Fire department is cashing checks.”

“I heard, thanks.”

She paused when she picked up the pack of steaks. “Really?”

“What?” Randy asked.

“Oh, nothing. Sorry. Just odd. No one is buying fresh meat. You didn’t strike me as the dehydrating guy.”

Randy chuckled. “I’m not. That’s a treat. Besides, I don’t have a dehydrator.”

“Don’t need one. Thirty-one fifty-two.”

Randy pulled out his money. “I don’t need a dehydrator to dehydrate?”

“Nope,” Millie then rattled off nonchalantly, “Got an oven? Pound the meat thin, cut it, season it, set the oven on the lowest temp, prop open the oven with a wooden spoon. Ten hours later ... jerky.” She took his money.

“That easy?”

“That easy.” She gave him his small amount of change.

Randy nodded; the dehydrating was something he’d give think about.

“Mr. Baker?”

Randy stopped and turned around. “Yeah?”

“Here.” She handed him three packs of cigarettes. “I know how many of these things you buy a week.”

Randy breathed out through his nose, producing a closed mouth smile. “Maybe now might be a good time to quit.”

“I’m kind of thinking ...” Millie chuckled, “maybe now is really *not* a good time to quit. Take them.”

“More than you know, I appreciate it. I owe you.” He winked and smiled. “Be safe.”

Millie only nodded.

Randy tossed the cigarettes into his bag and headed out. There were more people waiting in line, and he supposed as the day moved on and the fire department handed out funds, the line would extend.

But for that moment, Randy had all that he needed. Everything, except information as to what was going on.

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The jars were old; Grant could tell not only by the dust but by the style. Rita hadn’t canned green beans in jars like that for years. He lifted the jar and looked at the bottom; sure enough, the date stated the jar was ten years old. Grant didn’t throw it out; he marked it down and moved it to a top shelf. He was fairly certain he had a good five years left of sealed canned goods.

Rita canned all the time, so much so that he built the cold cellar for the

jars. She'd make them and give them out as gifts. Then many national events occurred, tornadoes, floods, end of the world predictions, and Rita started stockpiling.

She didn't can as much lately as she used to, but she still canned.

Grant deducted she liked canning beets, because there were an awful lot of those jars. Either that or she was embarrassed to give them away.

Just as he lifted a jar containing some green substance, unlabeled, unidentifiable, he heard footsteps above him. It was time to stop; Rita was awake. He set down the jar, closed up the cold cellar, and made his way upstairs.

He had made coffee earlier, placed it in the thermo pot. Rita was pouring a cup when he stepped into the kitchen.

She crinkled her brow, sipped her brew, and looked at him. "Something going on?"

"Why do you ask?" Grant questioned as he retrieved his own cup of coffee.

"You were in the basement. You're never down there." She scuffled to sit at the kitchen table, and groaned as she did.

"Achy?"

"Probably took too many tumbles last night. Cable is still out. Did you pay the bill?"

"I did, and it's out. Not because of nonpayment."

"I think I need to sober up some, at least enough to stop falling."

Grant smiled. "I think that's a good idea." He joined her at the table. "Rita, I don't have all the answers." He reached across and laid his hand on hers. "Something happened last night with that storm. Something beyond us."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't know. It knocked out all satellites, all computer networks, everything."

Rita cocked back. "Are we at war?"

"I don't know. No details have been given yet. There's no real radio or television; there is a FEMA station, but they just keep repeating it's a global event."

"Have you tried your old ham radio?" she asked.

"That was my next step. I wanted to get our things in order. We have a lot more than normal folks, and I just wanted to secure it."

"You said you don't know much, so why are you securing things?"

Grant took a deep breath. "Everything is cash only. People are lining up at the gas stations, and the cities ... the cities, Rita, are being evacuated."

All color dropped from her face. "It's not war?"

Grant shrugged. "It could be some natural phenomenon. I don't know. No one knows. I mean, someone does, just not us."

"Oh my God." Rita's hand shot to her mouth. "Brad."

With a nod, Grant exhaled. "I know. I thought about it. He lives in the

city. I mean right in the heart of the city. They're evacuating. Cell phones are down, I tried to call. No luck. I'm sure ... I'm sure Brad is on his way."

"Can we go? Can we find out?" Rita asked with rushed concern.

Grant shook his head. "All routes into the city are closed. They say traffic is just deadlocked. All we can do is get our belongings secure and in order, and try the old radio to get some answers. Whatever it is that they're expecting to happen, the evacuation is massive. No one is getting left behind."

"Are you sure?"

Tapping her hand, Grant stared at her with sincerity. "Positive. I am sure. Brad got out."

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At one time, it was the prestigious, well-trusted Delta Office Supply Company, seven floors of office equipment, located a block down the street from the old Gimble's department store. In the heyday, downtown was the place to be, to shop, to live.

Brad had inadvertently inherited the high rent, highly-desired loft-style apartment that at one time was the employee break room of Delta. He had crashed on the couch of his drummer, an old jazz musician who doubled as the superintendent of the apartment building, a job he secured when the building was renovated and converted three decades earlier.

The apartment was almost as old as Brad, and it was probably the only apartment with original appliances and an interior that looked that old.

Brad had crashed on the couch, eventually became a roommate, and when Jeff, the drummer, died, Brad just stayed on.

He got the apartment.

Rent was high and it took pretty much all of Brad's money to keep, but he loved it. It fueled his imagination as a musician and artist.

His dreams of being a rock star were still in full focus but often dashed by the reality of paying the bills. Brad was talented, the best jazz guitarist in the city. Though jazz wasn't his genre of choice, he made a decent living out of it and was part of the house band at the best restaurant in the city.

The night before, Brad was supposed to play until one in the morning, but the storms sent patrons home early, and the band ended their set just before midnight.

It could have been a good night, but his on and off again girlfriend, Renee, decided to pick a fight, and on top of that, his mother had been drinking heavily and kept calling him to turn on some infomercial about abused animals.

Brad, who inherited the ability to consume alcohol at a disturbing rate, ended up killing almost a fifth of Jack Daniels between fighting with Renee

and listening to his mother. Somewhere around three he determined he was way too hyper and took two sleeping pills.

He was drunk.

He could have died.

In fact, when he woke up, he wished he were dead. His head pounded as he had never experienced before. He had passed out on top of the bed and found himself buried beneath the comforter, so much so that he struggled to kick his way free. His long hair dangled in his face as, squinting, he eyed that bottle of water on the nightstand.

He crawled across the bed for the water, sat up, and downed it.

His ponytail holder was discombobulated, so he fixed that before finishing off the water. Some aspirin was on the list and then back to sleep. It had to be early; it was too quiet. No outside noises made their way in.

The blinds were drawn, and the apartment was dark. It took everything he had to swing his legs over the edge of the bed and stand. What a night.

His body felt as if a truck hit it. Those sleeping pills gave him weird dreams. He swore someone was pounding on his door earlier.

He grabbed his phone on his way to the bathroom. He fully expected to see a ton of text messages from Renee. Once he stood over the commode and realized he'd be there for a while, he looked at his phone.

No messages.

Odd.

Then he realized he didn't have a signal.

"What the fuck?" he mumbled and then shrieked with a jump, nearly pissing all over himself when he saw the time.

3:45!

Thinking "Holy shit!", Brad realized that taking those sleeping pills was a big mistake. No wonder he was so dehydrated and had a headache.

He was out of sorts and had to get it together. He thought about calling his day job, but realized, since he was already five hours late, he probably didn't have a job there any longer.

He hurried to the fridge and grabbed a can of soda. Quick caffeine into his system to figure things out.

Even though his phone didn't have a signal, he tried anyway.

Nothing.

"I'm so screwed," Brad groaned. He grabbed the aspirin, dumped some in his hand then mouth and washed them down with the cola. He gagged when one got caught in his throat. It took a second; another swallow and Brad stopped choking.

Think. Think. He couldn't believe he slept so long.

As he paced, his foot hit his guitar case. With a shout of vulgarity, Brad walked to the window and turned the blind to let in some light.

Can to his mouth, he turned away from the window and stopped. With a quick turn of his body, he flew back to the window and opened the blinds

fully.

Everything was wrong.

Maybe he was still dreaming or half-asleep; he didn't know. But he had to find out.

Quickly, he put on his flip-flops and raced out the door. The moment he stepped into the hall, he realized he'd missed something.

Every apartment door was open.

Foregoing the elevator, Brad ran down the two flights of stairs into the lobby.

Empty.

Where was Pete the security guard?

Typically, busses roared by, traffic noises and shouting filled the air, and patrons walked by his apartment door.

But there was nothing.

Brad raced out. The second he did, he forgot about his headache and focused on his breathing.

He had to catch his breath.

He turned, left to right and all around.

Cars were in the middle of the street, just abandoned. Briefcases laid everywhere, papers scattered. Purses. A bus was parked with the doors wide open.

It was quiet. Not a sound. Not a car. Not a person.

Brad slowly stepped into the street.

"Hello!" he called out.

His voice echoed.

"Hello!" he tried again.

Still no response.

Where was everyone? The busy office workers who moved about downtown like drones, the homeless man who sat across the street?

Gone.

Deserted.

He wasn't sleeping, he wasn't dreaming. He was awake.

Brad went to sleep hammered and feeling like a loser, but he woke up scared and feeling an awful lot like a hung-over Charlton Heston in an Omega Man world.

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Rita was at it full-force. The canning pot was on the stove; she had taken everything she picked up from Bilks Farm and prepped it. Even onions.

She pulled out the old dehydrator that she hadn't used in decades and fired it up, as well.

Grant wondered if internally Rita knew or felt something. She did often have those odd feelings that ended up coming true.

So when she was concerned about Brad, Grant took notice.

Art's hardware still had a functioning landline, so Grant called to see if he had any jars for canning.

Art laughed. "Your wife is a rarity; no one cans around here anymore. Come and take them all. I'll send people to you if they need them."

Grant was grateful. Though he hated leaving Rita, he went to the hardware store. The late afternoon had a strange feeling to it. There was no sun, and it was so overcast that it looked as if it were going to be dark soon.

And the steady trickle of traffic from downtown had subsided.

Traffic had gone from heavy to light to absolutely nothing. People were still lined up outside the fire hall waiting on their fifty bucks. Just out of curiosity, Grant drove by the market to see what was happening there.

The line snaked from the front of the store down the block. As he drove by, Grant saw Len Pickens leaving the line, and he slowed down. "Len, you need a ride?"

Len was older than Grant; he was another frequent flyer at Roy's. The man nodded with an exhalation. "That would be great if it's not out of your way."

"No, not at all. Heading to Art's. Hop in. It's only a few blocks."

Len did. "Appreciate it, Grant, I do. Really hot out there."

"Hopefully it'll rain," Grant said. "Have you heard anything?"

Len shook his head. "Nothing. Someone kept the radio playing in the parking lot, but it's the same message. Beginning to realize it's a recording."

"Yeah, and nothing is coming in on the ham yet."

"Well, we're an old breed, there, Grant. Give it time, people will figure out the radio and we'll hear the chatter," Len said, wiping sweat from his brow.

"Why'd you leave the line? Tired of waiting?"

"I could have waited, but Stork's is closing at five. And I doubt I'd get in by then."

"I can run you to Bilks Farm; they have that market."

Len shook his head. “Bilks ain’t open. They have a sign they’ll open tomorrow for four hours, and it’s all gonna be by alphabet. Just to make sure there’s no hoarding.”

Grant whistled. “Wow. This thing, whatever it is, has to be big.”

“We’re all thinking the same way. Technology shut down, cities evacuated. FEMA radio. It’s big.”

“I saw a couple of those city refugee buses earlier. But I haven’t seen one in a while.”

“Probably won’t,” Len said. “Bart’s kid took his motorbike as far as he could into town.”

“And?”

“And, well, he only made it halfway to Saw Run. It’s so crowded, no one is getting through, and people are abandoning cars. An officer told the kid it could be a day before they got things moving. You got cars going to town blocking traffic against those leaving. It’s a mess.”

“Sounds it.” Grant slowed down on Len’s street. “I’ll drop you here. Now, do you and Madge need anything? You were at the store.”

Len shook his head. “We’re good. I just wanted some back up.”

“Well, find me if you do. Okay?”

“Appreciate it.” Len opened the door and got out. He looked back. “Good luck.”

Grant nodded. “You too.” After the door closed, Grant turned the car around. Art’s was a block beforehand.

Just as he pulled into Art’s he saw a solitary blue bus. In fact, it was the only one he had seen that had stopped.

Heart pounding, thinking, “Brad”, Grant pulled into the lot and parked his car.

Brad didn’t have a car; surely he’d be on a bus that left the city.

The doors to the bus opened and only one person stepped off. It was a woman carrying a ridiculously large, furry duffle bag.

Obviously it wasn’t Brad. Feeling somewhat dejected, and praying that Brad was all right, Grant returned to his task of getting those jars from the hardware store.

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The daylight seemed to be fading, but it wasn’t late. He peered out the window then returned to finish his steak, or at least the small portion he fried as a treat. Just a couple bites. It worked. He was hungry and had spent nearly three hours in line at the fire hall cashing a check.

He planned on cooking an entire steak, but he kept thinking of Millie and the mysterious event at hand.

What if it actually was big? What if that steak, that meat was the last he was able to get? So, after cutting off a few ounces, Randy followed Millie's instructions; he pounded the meat thin, seasoned it, and began the dehydration. He did so before going to the fire hall.

He reminded himself to thank Millie. His entire home smelled wonderful.

He was grateful for his overstocked personal bar and sipped a glass of bourbon as he savored his last bite of steak.

He only hoped his homemade jerky would taste as good.

As he swallowed the last bite, he swished the brown liquid in his rocks glass and downed it. His plan was to kick back on the couch then head to Roy's. If anyone knew anything, they'd be talking about it there.

Just as he prepared to refill his glass, there was a knock at his door.

It surprised him; Randy didn't get much company. He walked to the door and opened it.

She faced the other way and spun dramatically when he answered her knock.

"Oh, Randy, please tell me you have air conditioning," she said in a wispy voice, stepping in and exhaling. "Oh. You do." She leaned against the wall. "Please close the door, you're letting the hot air in. It's like a million degrees out there."

She rambled as Randy registered the fact that his ex-wife Sonya was standing in his apartment. She lay down an ugly furry duffle bag along with her purse. "Randy? The door."

Randy shut the door and looked at her.

She blew from her mouth an exhalation that flapped her bangs. Her short brown hair was perfectly done. Her lipstick was fresh along with the rest of her makeup, and for some strange reason she wore heels. "You would not believe how long I was on the evacuation bus." She stepped further inside. "This is nice. Small. Something smells divine. Tell me you made supper, I am starving."

Randy was at a loss for words. "You took a bus here?"

"My car ran out of gas. Could you believe I was the first out of downtown too?" She shook her head.

"Have you heard from the boys?" Randy asked.

"No. I tried. I am sure they're fine. But with them living out of state, it's hard to tell."

"Why ... why are you here?" Randy asked.

Sonya looked dejected when he asked her that question. "Am I not welcome?"

"I just ..."

"Randy, I have nowhere else to go. Obviously I couldn't get to Cleveland to see our son. When the bus was going through Finetown ..."

"Finleyville." Randy corrected.

"Yes, whatever, I asked if they could drop me off. You said you lived in Fineville."

"Fin ... lee ... ville."

"Yes, whatever." She exhaled. "Not three miles before. Some rugged man with a missing tooth gave me a ride here. He was thrilled when I gave him five dollars. Poor soul must be out of work."

"You have cash."

She chuckled. "Of course. I didn't get to go to the bank. I hit the casino yesterday afternoon with the girls."

"How much?" Randy asked.

"Not much. Six hundred."

Randy gasped. "Okay, that's good. Cash is good." He ran his fingers through his hair.

"May I have a drink? I'm parched."

"Help yourself. There's plenty in the kitchen."

She snickered.

"What's so funny?"

"That area over there with the counter. Cute." She walked to the kitchen.

"Oh, bourbon. Thank God you're still an alcoholic."

Randy looked at her belongings that she'd plopped on his living room floor.

"Oh, I remember these glasses." She said from the kitchen. "Randy? I hope you don't mind me staying. I really had nowhere else to go. You didn't live in the city and ..." she walked back into the living room. "I honestly could not see me staying at a refugee center or camp. Can you?"

Randy gave her a once over. "No. In fact, I can't believe you're wearing heels and a suit."

"I was dressed for work when they pounded on my door." She shrugged. "They said there was an immediate evacuation and to take what I could. I did."

"Did they say why they were evacuating?"

She sipped her drink and nodded. "Yes. At first I argued about going, and then the man at the door said they were evacuating because a huge flood was coming."

"A flood." Randy stated.

"Yes."

"And you believe that?"

"Of course. That's why I left. I didn't want to be caught in the flood."

"Sonya, you live in the penthouse apartment of a thirty-story building. If your apartment gets flooded, it's the apocalypse."

"Exactly." she pointed. "That's what people think."

"That's ridiculous." Randy scoffed, reached out, took her drink, downed it and handed her the empty glass.

"Then what else is it?"

“I ... I don’t know.” He went into the kitchen.

Sonya followed him. “Well, then, until you come up with a better answer ... I believe it is the apocalypse, a flood is coming and ...” She set the empty glass before him. “I need to get drunk. Hit me.” She smiled.

“Hit you?”

She smiled in an oblivious way. Her eyes shifted to the stove. “Randy, sweetie, I’m not a cook, but your oven is open with a spoon. I don’t think that works.”

Randy grunted and gave her a splash, then took the bottle and walked away.

Of all the catastrophic events that could occur, at that moment, at least, he was labeling Sonya’s arrival at his home as one of the worst.

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Brad felt more than just shock in regards to the town being deserted. He had a hard time getting his bearings. Brad was in a fog, badly hung over and dragging from the pills, and he wasn’t thinking clearly.

His first comprehensive thought was, “Oh God a bomb is coming” and, barefoot, jumped in the first abandoned car that still had keys.

He only made it a block before the road completely jammed with cars. Abandoned cars were on the sidewalk, everywhere. He turned back around and ran into the same thing.

He was stuck. Then the bomb thought left him. It was after four in the afternoon; surely, if a bomb was coming, it would have exploded already.

It was then he determined that it was probably wise to get out of the city, and he would have to do so by foot.

He returned to his apartment to get some things.

Brad never noticed the electrical hum of life until it was gone. In fact, he heard it stop as soon as he stepped into his building.

Everything went black, but it was only for a few moments. The lights flickered and returned, but they seemed dimmer.

Close to a hundred degrees outside, the building was going to get worse if the lights went out.

Brad didn’t plan on being there that long. In case some major event was indeed going to occur, he needed to get out of Dodge.

However, it was getting dark. The cloud formation in the sky was thick and gray, allowing no sun to come through. It actually was hard to tell if the sun was setting early or a bad storm was brewing. It got dark earlier the night before, as well.

Almost as if something had moved in and blocked the sun. But if it did, Brad couldn't see it; the clouds were too dense.

The task of packing up wasn't easy, not when it dawned on Brad that there was a chance he would not return and that whatever this was, his home could be destroyed. It was then that he thought of his guitars. He had so many; they were like his children. Which would he take? He couldn't leave them, no way. However, he couldn't take them all. Not if he was walking out of the city.

Two, if he had to pick two, which would they be?

The lights flickered again, and he ruled out the electric ones.

Besides, he thought, if things were going to pot in the world, guitars would be plentiful. But his ... they meant something. Every single guitar had a story.

And they were the only things in his possession that meant something.

A person doesn't really realize what they are attached to until they have to pick and choose what doesn't get taken.

Before the decisions, he gathered what he needed for the journey out of the city. He'd search out his parents, that was the first thing he'd do, and they were only 30 miles away. A day's walk at best. But he had to assume that he couldn't get supplies on the way. So, water, food, and booze went into the small black knapsack.

He had a sleeping roll that he could tote over his shoulder, and he tossed in his bag, along with two tee shirts, a pair of shorts, and flip-flops. Not that flip-flops were good walking shoes, they weren't. But when his feet got hot, they'd be a bit of relief. Especially in this heat.

As he went back into the living room to debate about his guitars, he passed the framed family photos. None of them could stay behind. There were only a few, but every single one of them had Bill.

Brad adored his big brother. In fact, Brad was in his late teens before he realized Bill was, by blood, his half brother. But Bill was no less a full brother to him.

He stared at the picture when they went fishing with his father. Neither he nor Bill could fish. Bill was five years older than Brad and never knew his biological father. While his mom made up stories, truth was, both Brad and Bill believed she didn't know whom his father was.

His mother's reputation preceded her.

That didn't matter; Bill called Grant "Dad", and he raised them both. Bill was the best big brother any guy could have. He was smart, brave, straight-edged, and the women loved him. But he chose a career in the Marines over marriage. In Brad's eyes, Bill could do no wrong; Brad idolized him to a fault and to the point of being utterly destroyed when Bill was killed.

He was at a gig when his phone rang. A missed call from his father. It was after midnight, and back then, his parents never called that late.

Something was wrong.

He immediately thought it was his mother.

First chance he had to take a break, he slipped from the stage and called him.

It wasn't the news he expected. His father and mother were leaving for Virginia, Quantico to be exact; Bill was in an accident.

It didn't make sense to Brad, and it wasn't fair, all those tours of combat, war zones, Bill emerged unscathed. Yet, he was crossing the street, following the light, doing everything right like he always did, and a car hit him.

Not a drunk driver, not a reckless driver, just someone who didn't see him as the car turned the corner.

He went to church, fought for his country, never hurt a soul, and he was hit by a car as if he were some animal standing on the road.

He lay down his guitar, told the band he had to leave, and he left. It was the first and last time Brad ever left a gig.

The trip to Quantico wasn't a short one, and Brad, who really didn't believe in prayer, was that person who suddenly prayed.

He prayed all the way to Virginia.

Bill held on long enough to see his family. It was as if someone whispered in his ear to hold on, they were on their way, because not five minutes after they walked into the hospital room, Bill smiled a serene smile and passed away.

Everything changed for Brad. At first he tried to live in his brother's footsteps, even going as far as to talk to a recruiter and enlist in the Marines, but he failed the drug test.

He quit playing music for a couple of years, went to school, waited tables, and waded through life. Then he heard a song, just a simple song he and Bill used to sing as kids, and he snapped back to his old life.

Bill loved when Brad played guitar and Bill wouldn't have wanted Brad to give up.

So Brad pursued his music and worked menial jobs to pay the bills. The only thing that Brad did for Bill was watch out for their mother. Bill was his mother's boy, and Brad tried to fill those shoes. Even though she drove him nuts with the late night drunken calls, Brad dealt with it for Bill.

Bill.

Brad immediately started taking the pictures out of the frames and he added them to his pile. Before he knew it, he had far too much to carry.

How was he going to take it all? He couldn't leave it behind. How did homeless people do it?

Homeless.

And with that thought, he had another.

The woman across the hall.

He used to make fun of her because she owned one of those old red wagons. A middle aged woman, like so many who lived downtown, didn't have a car. Instead of taking the bus to the grocery store, she hit every little

place downtown, toting around that red wagon with her Jack Russell Terrier perched inside as if it were some sort of royalty.

Yappy little thing. Brad didn't know her story, but he imagined he did. A divorced woman who worked from her home. He never saw her leave other than go to the store. She had to make good money; the apartments weren't cheap. Brad himself paid most of his money to live there. However, he didn't know her or anyone else in the building. Not personally. Her, well, he just nodded his hello when he'd see her, then laugh about her as soon as he could tell someone about her and her nifty red wagon.

Now he wanted that wagon. It would work to carry his things as he left town.

She lived across the hall, and Brad hoped she didn't lock her door if she left. If she left. More than likely she did. Brad was certain he was the only one who slept through everyone leaving town.

Unlike when he'd rushed out, he noticed the hallway this time when he left his apartment to go to wagon woman's place.

Most doors were open or ajar, and, thankfully, so was hers.

To be polite he knocked once and walked in, calling out, "hello!"

No sooner did he step inside than he saw her dog. The terrier was lying on the floor, and Brad got a sick feeling in his stomach; the dog looked dead.

"Hey," Brad called in a low voice. "Hey, boy."

Nothing. The dog didn't move.

He groaned out "Aw", then his demeanor switched. "Wow, this is nice in here."

A bigger loft style apartment, with divider walls. The woman kept it clean and it smelled fresh. Not for long though, if the dog was dead. If not, he was a heavy sleeper.

Finding that wagon wasn't difficult; it sat under the window by the radiator. He walked straight to it. Bending down for the handle, he glanced out the giant window and froze.

It was a view from the other side of the building. A view that faced another street, a bigger one, and plain as day, on a storefront window was a big yellow sign.

Even from a couple floors up, Brad could read the big black handwritten words.

"Were you Left Behind?"

And Brad's heart sunk. There were smaller words underneath that Brad couldn't read. He didn't need to. They were probably Bible anecdotes.

Left behind.

That explained it all.

It wasn't a war, evacuation, bomb, or anything like that.

No wonder everyone was gone.

It all made sense.

Brad was left behind.

It was the Rapture.

6. JULY 5 – EVENING

It took Brad a little longer to get ready. He downed one more glass of water and even took a shower hoping the water would ease the pounding hangover headache.

He had everything packed in the wagon and secured with belts; he was ready to leave. He didn't hold much hope of finding his parents. They were good people. They probably were taken in the Rapture thing. Well, maybe not his mother, he heard things about her. But his father went to church, was a good man, and even voted all the time. Not that it was a prerequisite for being Raptured, but it had to count for something.

Middle of the summer and it felt and looked like a massive storm was blowing in. Another one.

Brad debated on whether he should wait and leave in the morning. It grew darker by the second; the last thing he needed was to be caught outside, without cover, in a summer storm.

Figuring he'd go a few blocks and see what happened, Brad opened his apartment door and nearly jumped from his skin.

Sitting outside his door was that black and tan Jack Russell Terrier from across the hall.

He just sat there, staring.

"I thought you were dead." Brad told him, catching his breath.

The dog didn't react, didn't bark, just stared.

Brad snapped his finger. "Hey."

The dog stood robotically, walked by Brad, and into his apartment.

"I was just ..." Brad turned around; the dog was in the wagon. "Leaving. I guess you can go. Man, you must like this thing. Is that why you came here, because I took your wagon?" He bent down, reaching for the handle; as he did, he noticed it getting even darker. With a sigh, Brad retracted his hand. "You know what. Leaving right now is a bad idea. We'll head out in the morning. Okay?"

Nothing from the dog.

"Glad you like that idea. Not that, you know, we're missing anything, since everyone seems to have disappeared. I'll make us some food." Brad shut his front door all the way, locked it, and then went to the kitchen. He looked back once more to the dog who still didn't move or react.

At 6:22 PM, FEMA made a radio announcement. "It is advised that all unnecessary electrical equipment be unplugged to preserve future use. Limit use of transportation. Stay indoors. More to follow."

That was it. After the brief message there was a single tone that played for twenty seconds.

Then nothing.

Roy kept the radio on, but unplugged the television. "Bet they're expecting another one of those electrical storms." He walked over and refreshed Grant and Rita's drinks.

They shared a sandwich. Rita had been at the stove all day; she was worn out from cooking by supertime.

With a sad smile she nodded at Roy. "Thank you."

"Your boy is fine," Roy told her. "I feel it. I do."

Grant thanked him. He didn't want to hold up Roy with too much conversation; the place was busy, especially since Roy wasn't running cash only. Not that his charge card machine worked, but Roy had a paper and pencil and wrote down what people got. He stated to Grant that he wasn't worried about it because he had a feeling money wasn't going to mean much for a while.

Grant couldn't agree more. He and Rita sat at the bar in probably the quietest moment between them in decades. They were just going to share their meal, go home, and settle in. Grant didn't want to be too far from home or his basement. Another storm was brewing; he could feel it in his bones. And he had a feeling that this one was going to be far worse than the storm the previous night.

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"Randy, I can't keep up with you in these heels." Sonya clicked across the parking lot across the street from Roy's.

"No one said you had to come." Randy kept walking.

"I didn't want to be alone. It's the apocalypse, you know."

Randy ignored her.

Ten feet from the front door, Sonya gasped. The sound of her clicking heels suddenly stopped.

Randy spun around. "What? What's wrong now?"

"Oh ... my." She laid her hand to her chest. "Is this where we're going? I am completely overdressed."

"Where the hell did you think we were going?" he asked.

"You said you were going for a drink to see if anyone knows anything. I didn't ... I didn't think it would be a rundown house."

“We’re in a small town; did you actually think anything would be upscale?”

She shrugged. “I didn’t know. I guessed.”

“Let me ask you a question. Did you bring anything that you would consider casual?”

She shook her head.

Randy nodded. “You think it’s the apocalypse, so you brought only dressy clothes.”

She lifted a finger. “I brought sandals.”

“Oh my God.” Randy turned around.

“Randy, you don’t think people will stare at me, do you?”

“Yes,” Randy said and kept on walking.

He didn’t turn around to see her reaction or to wait; he walked in. He was glad to see Grant and Rita at the bar. There were a couple seats next to them.

“Randy,” Rita said his name with relief. “So good to see you.”

He kissed Rita on the cheek and shook hands with Grant.

“We were worried,” Grant said. “We know you work in the city.”

“I never made it this morning. Couldn’t even get close.” Randy replied.

Roy approached. “Double?” he asked.

Randy nodded at the same time that Grant choked on his drink.

“Look what the world’s end brought in,” Grant said sarcastically.

Roy looked. “Must be a refugee from one those high-class busses.”

“Good lord.” Grant downed his drink.

Randy didn’t need to turn around to know who they were talking about.

The chatter in the room lightened the second she stepped in. How could it not; Sonya was a complete contrast to everyone in there, men and women. She wore a stunning, black form-fitting shirt and dressy slacks with jewelry to match. Her hair was perfect as were her makeup and nails.

Most women at Roy’s didn’t wear much makeup. They dressed in blue jeans and tee-shirts, occasionally their husband’s flannel. If they really wanted to dress up they wore a sweater or a sports team hoodie.

Roy’s was just a laid back joint.

“Don’t look,” Rita said. “She’s coming this way. I think she has her eye on you, Randy.”

Randy winced.

“Randy, you didn’t wait for me.” Sonya said.

Another choke from Grant, “You know her?”

Sonya extended her hand daintily. “I’m his wife, Sonya.”

“Ex ... wife.” Randy quickly corrected.

For the first time all day, Rita laughed. “Sorry.” She introduced herself.

“Mind if I sit?” Sonya asked. “My feet are killing me. Randy made me walk all the way across the parking lot.”

Leaning back to examine her shoes, Rita whistled. “No wonder your feet hurt. How do you walk in those heels?”

“Usually easily.”

Roy set a napkin before her. “What will it be, doll?”

Sonya crinkled her face. “Is he talking to me?” she giggled. “Oh, how precious. Yes. I’ll have what Randy is having.”

Randy didn’t sit next to her; he sat on the other side of Grant, leaving Rita to deal with her.

Whispering, Grant asked Randy. “Did you make her that way during your marriage?”

Randy scoffed. “Are you kidding? She came that way when I got her.”

And Randy told the truth. Sonya never worked a day in her life. She thought she did as she labeled shopping and the online reviews she wrote of products she purchased, as work. She inherited a great deal of money from her father and never wanted for anything.

Roy poured the drink for Sonya. “Obviously, you aren’t from around here. Did you come from the city?”

“Oh, yes.” She sipped and spoke dramatically. “I was one of the first evacuated this morning. But my car ran out of gas and they stuck me on a bus. Simply terrible. Everyone trying to get out. My bus driver was brave. He went over parking lots, yards, you name it to get out of traffic. But we were the last bus to get out. His bus driver radio connections said everything was blocked.”

Rita asked. “So a lot of people didn’t get out?”

Sonya shook her head. “I don’t think they did. I have a theory on why.”

Randy groaned, “Oh God,” and gestured for another drink.

“No, Randy, it’s a good theory.” Sonya said. “The bus driver liked it.”

“What is it?” Roy asked.

“I was one of the first ones out, but I had to wait nearly two hours on Saw Run Road, because they had to block off all incoming traffic. Two hours, imagine how bad traffic backed up behind me. And, well, the traffic they were blocking.” She exhaled. “That just crushed all cars in. At first they were able to move buses on the shoulders of the roads, and then people stopped paying attention to the police and they started taking the shoulders too and then there were accidents and that was that.” She finished her drink. “More please, thank you. I have cash.”

Roy refilled her drink. “Did they say why they were evacuating? We can’t get anything on the radio.”

Randy waved out his hand as if to signal not to ask.

Sonya answered. “There’s a flood coming. A big one.”

Roy looked at Randy and then Grant then back to Sonya. “A flood?”

“Like Noah size,” she said. “They told me I had to leave, and I live on the thirtieth floor.”

“Do you think maybe they told you that to get you moving?” Roy questioned.

Sonya tilted her head with a clueless look. “Why would they do that?”

Roy cleared his throat and, without prompting, gave an extra splash to

Randy. "Well, I still say Bill Flynn's idea is the best."

"What's that?" Randy asked.

Grant answered. "Fuel a crop plane, fly out to the city, see what's going on. In fact, try to even go north."

Roy continued. "Gotta find a pilot though."

As if it were nothing, Sonya said, "Randy flies."

Randy winced and they all looked at him.

"You fly?" Roy asked.

"Oh, sure," Sonya answered for him. "Had his pilot's license since he was seventeen. Flew for the airlines. Until, you know, he got fired for drinking on the job. He was a bigger alcoholic back then."

Randy closed his eyes.

Rita looked around Grant. "How long were you two married?"

"Twenty years," Randy grumbled.

Rita huffed and shook her head. "And you lasted that long with her?"

Grant added. "I would have killed her."

"I still may," Randy whispered.

"Hell," Grant nudged him. "If it's the end of the world, there'll be no laws."

"Seriously, though," Roy said. "You really fly?"

Randy nodded. "Yeah, and if you can't find anyone, I should be able to fly that plane."

That was all there was of the conversation. A huge boom of thunder brought silence to the bar and rattled glasses.

A young man flew into Roy's. "You guys have to come out and see this storm. Hurry." He flew back out.

Randy, Grant, Rita, and everyone else rushed to the door.

It was pitch black. Not even seven o'clock and it was dark. But the sky lit up as if fireworks were exploding in the atmosphere. Unlike the night before, the flashes of light were constant. Red, blue, yellow. Bright flashes of white intermittently illuminated everyone.

A hum filled the warm air with the bangs of thunder. Grant took hold of Rita's arm. "I think maybe you and I should head on home."

Rita nodded, laying her hand over Grant's. "I think maybe you're right."

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Brad played his acoustic guitar for an hour, trying to think of God songs to play, but he really didn't know any. He played and the dog stared. He was like a statue. Just staring. Not even that severe blast of thunder startled the

dog.

Nothing did.

Then as Brad started strumming another song, the dog cocked his head, jumped from the wagon, and barked once.

“Oh, he lives,” Brad said sarcastically.

The jumpy dog leapt at Brad’s hand and nipped him as he went to strum.

“Hey, what the fuck?”

The dog was motivated, trying to tell Brad something. Suddenly the dog that didn’t make a noise was grabbing at his shoe, tugging his pant leg. Nip, run, return, nip, run.

Finally, it dawned on Brad that the dog wanted something. “I’m not taking you out. Did you see it out there?”

The dog bit onto his jeans and pulled.

“Okay, okay, show me what you want.” Brad followed the scurrying dog.

He stopped at the closet.

“Nothing is here. Just a walk-in closet.”

The dog ran in. When Brad didn’t follow, the dog returned to pull at him.

“You want me in there with you?”

Again the dog tugged his pant leg.

“Oh my God, okay.” Brad walked into the closet. “Man, are you a pampered pet.”

The dog moved to the closet door, ran his paw over it.

“What? You want me to shut the door.” Brad huffed. “Fine. I’m doing this because we’re the only ones left on earth, you know.” He pulled the string on the mini battery operated light and closed the closet door. “Better?”

The dog stopped, sat there and stared again.

Wondering how long he’d have to pacify the dog, Brad pulled a shirt off a hanger and folded it to make a seat. Just as he placed it on the floor, another boom of thunder occurred, this one worse than the last. It sounded like an explosion, and items fell from the closet shelf. Yet another explosion followed as Brad slid to the floor sitting next to the dog. “Okay, maybe this was a good idea after all.”

He sat there in the closet with the quiet dog, listening to the sounds and feeling the vibrations of the freakish storm.

7. JULY 6th

Past experience and a bad gut feeling caused Grant and Rita to camp out in their basement. It wasn't a bad basement, not cold or damp or even dirty. They pitched the cots with blankets, turned off all power to the house as FEMA recommended, and shared some brandy before going to sleep.

The storm was bad. While no rain fell, the lightning and thunder was like none they had seen in their lifetime. Both of them kept thinking solar storm or tornado, hence the reason for the basement camping night.

Grant woke first, stirring Rita.

"House is still standing, no tornado." Grant said.

"What about power?"

He walked to the circuit box and flipped the breaker. He gave a nod to Rita who turned on the basement light. It worked.

"We can have coffee." Grant told her.

"It feels weird, Grant."

"I know. Leave the blankets, we'll fold them later. Let's go up."

Rita agreed, holding his hand as they walked slowly up the basement stairs. Everything was the same, normal but quiet.

They hit the kitchen and Rita started the coffee while Grant turned on the radio and television.

Things were different. The local station no longer showed a stagnant picture telling people to tune into FEMA radio. There was only snow. And the radio, top of the hour, typical FEMA message time, was dead air.

Nothing.

Grant couldn't put his finger on what it was. The lights worked, technology was still gone, but something felt different. Very different about the day.

They best he could decipher of it all was the feeling of being alone.

As if he and Rita were the only ones left. While he knew that wasn't the case, he also knew something happened the night before during the freak storm. He just didn't know what.

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Brad fell asleep on the floor of the closet with the dog curled on his lap. Not where he wanted to fall asleep; it just happened. Every time he thought

about leaving the closet, he thought twice, giving it more time.

The storm sounded bad, and the closet felt safe.

The dog's demeanor was a bit different. It moved in circles, seemingly happier. Brad learned from looking at his tag that his name was Spunky.

Brad shifted some to crack his back and slowly stood. It was hot, really hot in that closet, and he anticipated fresh air upon opening the door.

He didn't get any. The apartment was stuffy, and the air was hot and thick. The air conditioning was off.

In fact, by the sounds of his apartment, the power was out.

Thinking, "Swell," Brad emerged from the closet. There was no reason to waste time. A trip the bathroom, brush his teeth, grab some water and a bite to eat. That was the agenda. Then Brad would head out, head south, and look for his parents.

He had no idea what time it was; his phone had died, and the day was overcast. Thankfully, the alarm clock by the bed had a battery backup, and he saw that it was early.

He'd get moving. He didn't look forward to lugging the wagon down the stairs, but it had to be done.

It was time for Brad to get out of the city.

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Simply, Randy was a nice guy. He had every reason not to allow Sonya into his home; after all, the church down the road was taking in refugees. But he let her stay, and not only that, he gave her his bed.

She chattered a good bit of the night, fearful of the heat storm and staying away from the windows.

Admittedly, the storm kept him awake but not as much as his neighbors upstairs. Sometime during the course of the night they were scurrying around the apartment, knocking things over. Maybe they were arguing, they did that often, but he didn't hear voices, only movement.

More than likely they were just afraid of the odd storm.

He finally fell asleep long after Sonya and deep into the night. The last thing he expected was to be woken up by a hard, steady pounding at the door. Face buried in the back of the couch, Randy squinted to look at his watch. It was just after seven, and with another roll, he swung his legs over the couch.

"Ow!" Sonya cried.

Randy blinked and looked down; he had dropped his feet right on top of her. "What the hell are you doing on the floor?"

"I got scared and moved in here. I was afraid the window was going to break or something."

The knocking continued.

“Someone’s at the door,” she said groggily.

“I know. I know.” Carefully, Randy stepped over her, patted down his hair and walked to the door.

He was half out of it when he opened the door, but the sight of the sheriff and deputy was like a dose of caffeine.

“Mr. Baker?” The sheriff asked.

Randy nodded. A lump formed in his stomach; he was fearful that it was news of his sons.

“We’re just doing a door to door check to make sure everyone is okay.”

“Well, yeah. We’re fine.” Randy was puzzled.

“Thank you. Sorry to bother you so early.” The sheriff turned, stopped and faced Randy again. “Mr. Baker, are you busy today?”

“I am. What’s up?”

“We need as many able-bodied men as we can get. You look able bodied. Meeting up at the fire hall at ten. I’d appreciate if you’d be there.”

“Absolutely.”

The sheriff nodded. “Much obliged.”

It took a moment to register with Randy. Door to door checks, asking if everyone was all right, able bodied men. “Sheriff?” Randy called. “Is everything okay?”

The sheriff paused, but only for a moment. He solemnly answered “No” and kept on walking.

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The dismal, overcast day made it look a lot worse than it probably was. Well, that was Brad’s first thought, and then he realized it probably couldn’t get any worse.

It wasn’t as easy as he pictured in his head, walking down the long line of traffic. It wasn’t as he had seen in any end-of-the-world movies. No, those survivors seemed to easily slip through cars. He saw himself as Larry from The Stand, traveling with his guitar, pausing to play Eve of Destruction on some car hood. Only Brad had a red wagon with a weird dog perched inside.

But it wasn’t that simple. Cars weren’t lined up on the road; they were squished together like sardines. Bumper to bumper on sidewalks. He only hoped as he got out of the inner city it would get better. It did ... some.

It took over an hour to get to the edge of the city, which wasn’t even a mile.

“Half down, twenty-nine and a half more,” Brad said to Spunky. “Think I need a break.”

He found a decent spot between a Chevy and Toyota and peeked into the

car before sitting down. It was empty, like every other car before it. A car seat was in the back. “Man, the Rapture took everyone. This is sad. Glory in Heaven shit or not.” Brad pointed to the car seat. After a shake of his head, he plopped to the ground, reached into his bag, and pulled out a pipe. He packed it, lit it and hit it. Holding in the smoke, he extended it to the dog. “Nah,” he coughed as he released the smoke. “You’re already too mellow. What the hell was she thinking, calling you Spunky?” Brad laughed and continued his smoke.

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Randy was fourth to show up at the fire hall. Seventeen in all, not including the sheriff, were there. Two dump trucks were in the parking lot along with numerous pickup trucks.

Rita was there brewing coffee and handing out little plastic bags of granola to everyone. Randy asked Grant if he knew what was going on; Grant didn’t. He just showed up because he was asked.

The sheriff, or Stew as everyone else called him, walked up on the stage where the bingo caller usually sat. He looked drawn, his shirt not buttoned all the way, and he wiped the sweat from his brow and neck. He was a stocky man in his fifties, the sheriff of a town that rarely saw a crime and made extra cash from catching drunk drivers who weren’t local.

He tried to speak, but his voice cracked. After clearing his throat, he spoke in a heavy voice. “Thank you all for coming. I know ... I know you’re all wondering why I asked you to come here. I didn’t say much, because, well, I didn’t feel like repeating it a hundred times this morning. So I’ll say it now. I’m sure we’ll get more help as the day goes on.” He exhaled heavily. “This morning about five a.m., one of the migrant workers that live in the transient trailer place behind Bilk’s came to the station. He went to his neighbor’s trailer to get him for field work and, well ... the worker and his family ...” Stew paused. “Something happened to them. When he went to another trailer for help ... something had happened to them as well.”

Every man in the room seemed to question out loud.

What happened?

What are you talking about?

Stew only held up his hand. “He came to us. As you know, they trailer area is temporary for summer and fall, so it’s hard to say how many live there. So when we arrived there ...” He paused. “Excuse me.” He lifted a bottle of water, took a long drink, and appeared to compose himself. Another sigh. “Let’s just say after that, I went to the foreman’s house in Brooks. Again, same thing. This caused me, my men and some volunteer fireman to knock on every door in Brooks and Finleyville. Every house, every apartment. If they

didn't answer, we marked the door. And that's where you gentlemen come in. We're gonna need to pair off, go into the marked houses and see ..."

"Stew." Grant called out strong. "I know you're trying to beat around the bush. I know you're upset. God, we can see that. But we haven't a clue why we're going into the house or what happened."

Stew gave a wave of his hand. "Maybe it's best if you follow me." He stepped off the stage and walked to the door. He stopped when he saw Rita tagging along. "Rita, you may want to stay behind."

"Sheriff, I'm seventy-three years old. Not much in my life I haven't seen."

"You haven't seen this." The sheriff walked out.

He arrived at the first dump truck and covered his mouth. A gray tarp was inside, and as soon as the others got closer, they all had the same reaction.

Gasping, gagging. Groaning in disgust at the smell.

"We just stopped going in and assumed," Stew said, "that the houses need to be cleaned. Bilks has an old warehouse. For the time being, we'll take them there. We stopped looking in the houses because it was the same in every house we went into. This ... this is what remains of the Larson family." He lifted the tarp.

It looked like mounds and mounds of liver. Red mush and streaks of purple, flies swarming about. It carried a sour, rotten odor. The only recognizable bit of human remains was the top of a foot.

There was more gasping and some vomiting.

Randy was in the back. He only caught a glimpse and turned away; the smell was bad enough.

Grant, his hand over his mouth and nose, asked. "What happened to them?"

Stew shrugged. "Your guess is as good as mine."

Every man had a reaction. Only one person was calm and didn't show signs of gagging or shock.

Rita.

She walked to the truck, grabbed the end of the tarp from Stew's hand, and let it fall again on the remains. "We've seen enough, Stew. Thank you." She gave him a pat to the cheek. "This is hard work. How many houses do these men have to go to?"

"At least thirty percent."

Rita pursed her lips and nodded. "I think they need more than coffee for this." She shook her head and walked off.

Grant stepped back, turned, and walked to Randy. "You okay with this?"

"No." Randy shook his head. "But someone has to help out. I don't know how strong my stomach is."

"Not strong enough, I can tell you."

"What do you think happened?" Randy asked.

"I don't know. But I don't think it's any coincidence that one storm we

lose technology, the next ... we lose people.” Grant exhaled. “God help us with the next.” He turned and followed his wife into the building.

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The squeaky wheels of the wagon were the only sound as Brad moved freely out of the city. He moved at a steady pace over the bridge to where all four lanes and shoulders were utilized for outbound traffic. Spunky never made a noise. Not one.

Saw Run Road ran north and south. Balm ran west from the city. Just at the ‘T’ where Saw Run crossed over Balm, traffic was a cluster fuck. Cars everywhere, every direction, apparently trying to squeeze by, get around, and there were accidents galore.

Just at that point, not only did traffic clog the road, everything changed.

Brad’s buzz left him in a hurry the second he was hit with a smell. Putrid, horrendous, sour. His eyes watered. It wasn’t just one spot, it was in the air. It was a bad rendition of his fridge at the end of the year.

He slowed down as he turned onto Saw Run.

Something was different about the cars.

Up ahead, doors were open, and the cars all looked dirty, but a weird dirty. He stopped moving when his foot sank into something soft. Fearful, he looked down, praying and hoping he stepped on an orange or banana.

But he didn’t.

A grunting “oh God” came from his chest, and his stomach churned when he saw the thick red substance beneath his shoe. He lifted his foot, and strands followed him.

His mouth watered, his stomach knotted and he turned his head to vomit.

As his regurgitation spewed forth, he looked inside the car.

That red substance was everywhere, on the driver’s seat, steering wheel, passenger’s seat; it flowed out of the open door and to the road.

Again, he threw up. He wanted to stop but couldn’t. When he finally gained control, he hurriedly checked on Spunky. The smart, quiet dog had buried himself under Brad’s things.

Wishing he could do the same, but knowing he couldn’t, Brad wiped his hand over his mouth and decided he had to hightail it out of there.

He couldn’t do so without seeing the cars. He tried not to, but it was impossible. There were so many cars and each one held the same horrid scene, Thick, red, meat-like substances that Brad could only deduce were human remains.

At that instance, picking up speed, Brad was glad he wasn’t chosen for the Rapture. Not if that’s the way people went.

He moved as fast as he could with that wagon. He got about fifty cars

down when out from behind a van jumped a man.

“Help me,” He reached out to Brad.

Brad’s eyes widened. The man was covered in blood.

“Help ...” With that word a thick, dark fluid spewed forth from his mouth, flowing like lava. “Me.” He choked.

Brad didn’t know what to do, how to help. “I ... I ... I ...”

The man moved to him. His pale face looked as if it had deep open wounds. “Help ... me.” His fingers neared Brad.

Hating himself as he did so, Brad backed up. He was scared. He looked at the bloody hands then again at the man. With each move, each step, more of that black bloody lava came from the man’s mouth.

“Help ...”

Bang.

A single gunshot rang out, a bullet seared into the man’s head, and he dropped to the ground.

Before Brad could register what had happened, someone brushed by him nearly knocking him over.

It was a blur. A hand pulled him back; all Brad saw was the camouflage uniform and battle gear.

The military person swung around his weapon, holding it aimed at the man’s body, then nudged the body with a boot.

He lowered the weapon and his shoulders drooped in defeat. This person wasn’t huge, but he wasn’t small. Close to six feet, thick build, muscular.

“Thank you, sir.” Brad said. “I ... I didn’t know what to do.”

The voice whispered. “Just don’t touch him. He could be contagious.”

Contagious? Brad thought. Probably one of those plagues mentioned in the bible. “Okay.” He crinkled his brow. “Thank you again. You saved him. He looked like he was suffering. It’s good to see the military.”

“What’s left.” Was the reply.

A turn of the body and Brad saw he wasn’t dealing with a sir, just a very large woman, a woman he wouldn’t want to tackle. But her face was gentle. A pretty face, plain, no makeup. She removed her helmet, and he saw that her hair was dishwater blonde, short and choppy.

Brad cocked back. “Sorry, I called you a sir. Um... ma’am.”

She gave a sad smile. “Not ma’am either, I’m not an officer. Just call me Jess.” She removed her helmet and extended a hand.

“Brad.”

“Where you headed, Brad?” she asked.

“Straight ahead down this road for a while. Home. Or rather to see if my parents are still around. Hoping one of them didn’t go. Selfish, huh?”

She shook her head. “Not at all. I’m hoping the same for my family.”

“Where you from?”

She huffed in disgust. “Oklahoma. I know. Long way from home.”

“You’ll get there.”

“Yeah.” She blinked, looking tired; her eyes were bloodshot. “Mind if I walk with you?”

“Sure.” Brad said. “I’d like the company. But, I warn you, all this is making me sick.”

She started to walk. “Breathe through your mouth. Try not to look. I know. It’s tough. Hopefully it’ll subside once we get out of all this traffic.”

“Hope. Jess, so you know, I’m not armed and not sure how much protection I can be for you.”

She peered over her shoulder at him.

“I mean, I don’t have a gun.” He followed. “But then again, you have several. Are you scared?”

She nodded, then looked back again. “Isn’t everyone?”

“Well, I guess whoever is left is scared,” Brad said. “Did they send the military in?”

“Yep.”

Brad blew out slowly from his mouth; that surprised him. “Really? Did they think it would work to stop it?”

“They hoped. There’s still a fighting chance. Small one, but a fighting chance.”

“Really? Wow.” Brad shook his head once; he was in awe over what she said. “We must have stronger military forces than I thought.”

“Strongest fighting forces in the world,” Jess said.

“Strongest fighting forces in the world and ... hate to say it, beyond?”

“I hope.” She moved forward without looking back. “We have to be.”

Brad lifted his shirt over his nose. Not that it helped much. Jess led the way, and he followed; she headed in the right direction and was a much better focus than the bodies. She walked straight carrying her weapons. It was good to be around another person, other than the weird dog.

He tried as hard as he could to watch only her and not look at a single car or the contents within. But that was difficult, because remains weren’t just in the cars, they were on the streets and as far as the eye could see.

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It was without a doubt the most heart-wrenching day Randy had ever experienced. Physically and emotionally draining and it was far from done.

He and Grant paired off together with Pete Hensing. Pete drove his pickup truck, but before they left, Randy had gone back to the apartment. He didn’t know what to tell Sonya, so he was vague. Told her they needed men to build something. And when she was insistent, as much as he hated to do so, he told her levee walls for the flood.

He was confident that she wouldn’t leave after he told her her not to, so

Randy filled a flask, tucked it in his back pocket, and headed out.

Grant was a drinker, but Randy never took him to be a heavier drinker than he was, until Grant finished his own flask a few houses into the daunting task.

They were given a clipboard with addresses, some names. Pete was in charge of that. He drove. Many people were renters, new to the area, and their names weren't known yet.

There were two saving graces to the whole thing. One, Randy didn't know the people, and the other, there was nothing left that resembled a person.

Occasionally a body part would emerge, but that was occasionally.

It was weird, though, and it was pointed out that it seemed selective and isolated to an area.

Grant put a drafting compass on Bilks Farm, picked a radius and every house affected was in that radius, not beyond.

Was it something from the farm? It was hard to say; there were no authorities to call in. Not a single landline emergency number answered. The CDC didn't answer. Finleyville was in the dark as to what happened to their residents.

Some folks wanted to bury the bodies, but Stew insisted they put them in the old warehouse on the Bilks property, just in case officials did show up.

They lined the entire warehouse floor with plastic. After clearing a house of bodies, Randy, Grant, and Pete brought the remains to the warehouse, checked off the residence, and headed back out.

A few houses were empty. The residents weren't dead; they'd just packed up and left.

About the eighth house, Randy started developing an immunity to it. Until ... Pete stepped from the truck and said. "Aw, man, Millie Thomas."

Grant's head dropped, and Randy got a sick feeling in his stomach.

Millie from Stork's. She had three kids, one of which was only four. Randy prayed, he prayed hard that the house was empty, but he knew as soon as he stepped on the porch, that wasn't the case.

The smell permeated the air.

Bringing the back of his hand to his mouth, Randy stepped back. "I can't go in there. She has kids. I can't see kids. I can't."

With a single step, Pete walked to Randy and whispered. "You already did. You just didn't know it."

Grant laid a hand on his shoulder. "We'll handle this. I know you don't know many folks around here. We'll do this."

With a nod of thanks, Randy turned and stepped off the porch. He thought of Millie, how nice she was to him. How hard she worked, how often she bragged about her kids.

When he got back to the truck, he heard Pete holler, "Grant, hurry. The little one is alive!"

Randy spun. He lost his breath and immediately filled with hope, especially when Pete carried the child out.

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“Adam! Adam, can you hear me?” Doctor Emily Lawrence called the boy’s name as Pete carried him into her med center. It wasn’t a hospital, more of those one stop deals. But it was their only option.

A middle-aged woman, she grew up in Finleyville and was one of two doctors in town.

“Lay him down.”

Randy was in the exam room with Grant and Pete. Stew showed up, as well.

Pete said. “We went into the house, and he was in bed. Breathing. Not responding, though.”

The boy stared. His eyes were wide open, his mouth slightly agape. His skin was pale, really pale, and his pupils appeared to be dilated the entire diameter of his eyes.

“He could be in shock over what he saw.” Emily touched the boy's chin, shaking his head some. “Adam?”

He was still in his cartoon pajama bottoms. He was a thin boy, and on his back, his rib cage was predominant.

Emily brought the stethoscope to his chest. She paused.

Stew asked. “What’s wrong?”

“His heart sounds odd. Like it’s in water.” She moved the scope. “Lungs, too.” Her eyes skimmed his legs and face, and she moved the stethoscope to his stomach. “Odd.” Pulling them from her ears, she hung the instrument around her neck and brought her hands to his belly.

The second she began a routine palpitation of his midsection her hands just sunk into his abdomen. Straight into the flesh as if it were jelly.

Adam’s mouth widened and he released a horrendous inhuman scream and black projectile vomiting erupted from him. It shot outward. Choking, Adam then began to convulse.

Emily screamed in what could only be labeled as pain. Her hands were still deep within the boy and she couldn’t pull them out.

“Oh, God!” The thick red gel covered her arms. She cried out over and over, her hands inside the boy whose body jolted and shook on the table.

Grant grabbed for the boy, and Randy ran for Emily. He pulled at her, his arm around her waist. At first, she wouldn’t budge, and then with all his strength and the help of Pete they freed Emily. The force of the pull sent all three backwards, landing on the floor.

The second her hands were removed from Adam, the boy stopped

moving. His head tilted to the side. "He's dead." Grant said.

Stew gasped out a shocked, "Sweet Jesus."

Then Emily began to convulse.

Scooting out from under Emily, Randy saw her arms, her hands; they were quickly disintegrating as if she had been hit with acid.

No one was fast enough to react.

Randy certainly didn't know what to do. Emily's cries of pain transformed and like with Adam, she began to vomit the black substance.

Her head went back and forth, body up and down, until a gunshot silenced her.

Randy jolted and looked. Stew stood there, his revolver still extended, and he trembled slightly, never blinking, staring in shock.

In fact, no one said anything. No one moved.

What had just happened?

8.

Grant rushed with the other three men, out of breath, nervously into another room of the med center as if they had committed a murder.

The men had been emotionally affected, and it was evident on their faces. Their breaths mimicked each other, hard, fast, deep.

“Oh my God. Oh my God. Oh my God.” Pete repeated quickly.

“What just happened?” Randy asked. “What happened in there?”

“Whatever it is.” Stew held up his hand. “This can’t get out. It cannot get out.”

“For God’s sake, why?” Randy asked.

Grant answered. “People will panic. You wanna go tell them some microbe we can’t explain is killing people in this town?”

Pete stated. “They already know something’s up.”

Stew nodded. “Yeah, they do. But they haven’t a clue it jumps from body to body and is contagious.”

“We don’t know that,” Grant said. “We don’t. We know Emily got it ’cause she ...” Grant cringed. “Because her hands went in the boy.”

“Has anyone touched the stuff?” Randy asked. “The remains we brought out?”

Stew shook his head. “Everyone has been instructed to wear gloves. But doesn’t mean it isn’t contagious.”

Pete suggested, “We have to isolate ourselves. All of us who’ve removed remains.”

“No.” Grant stated strongly. “No.” he shook his head. “This thing isn’t gonna care if you’re isolated or not.”

Randy said, “Pete’s right. If we don’t isolate ourselves, how are we going to stop this from happening to everyone else?”

“Are you nuts?” Stew asked. “We haven’t a clue why this happened. It could happen again, tonight, tomorrow, next storm.”

“What we need are facts,” Grant said. “We need to find out why we weren’t killed and the others were. What we did differently. Then again, it could have been random, I don’t know. But we also need to find out if it is just us. We can be the only ones hit, the hardest hit, or only barely hit. We don’t know.”

Stew stated, “All communications are down.”

Grant looked at Randy. “You up for a road trip?”

“Miles Town?” Randy asked.

Grant nodded. “It’s seventeen miles south. Next biggest place. What do

you say?"

Randy nodded. "Let's clean up and go."

Grant agreed and swung a look at Stew. "Seal off this clinic. Then ... get your men together, call a town meeting. Go through the streets with bullhorns. Call it for this evening. Not late, though, in case we have another storm."

"And what's the meeting for?" Stew asked.

"Information," Grant said. "We find out what we can. Because if this wasn't the last of it, we have to figure out how not to lose more lives." He laid his hand on Randy's back, said they could go to his place to clean up and head out. With a "let's go", he led the way.

Randy followed.

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Route 6 crossed Saw Run Road twelve miles out of the city, and they hadn't even made it half of the way. Brad, his wagon, and Jess moved to the side of the road where they were able to walk around the cars and see less carnage.

Brad stopped. He was tired and hungry and needed a break. A "buy here pay here" car place was his designated stop. He walked into the lot and sat outside the trailer building. It was far enough away from the road where he didn't have to see remains, and he wasn't catching that strong of a scent.

He sat down, opened his bag, and pulled out his flip-flops.

"It's close to a hundred degrees out," Jess said. "Those are not sensible walking shoes."

Brad exhaled as he took off his socks. "Ah, I feel ten degrees cooler. Come on. Really, when your feet are cool, you feel cooler."

"True."

"Just ten minutes, okay."

"Five. It's three o'clock; I want to shelter down by six. It's been getting dark by then and I want us off the streets."

"But if we stop a reasonable number of times, we could conceivably get to Route 6 and get to Finleyville tonight."

"Trust me. Off the roads at dark."

Brad nodded. She knew better; after all, she was a warrior called upon to fight the holy war. How that was possible, Brad still didn't know.

He unzipped his bag, pulled out his pipe, and began to prep it.

"Really?" she said with an edge. "You're gonna smoke drugs."

"I am." He lit it and extended it to her, holding in the smoke.

"No." She shook her head.

"Why don't you sit down?"

"If I sit, I'll get tired, so I'll stand."

“Suit yourself.” He reached into his wagon as he indulged in his pipe. He pulled out a bottle of water and a dish. He thought of the dog and gave Spunky water.

“What’s wrong with him?” Jess asked. “He doesn’t bark or do anything.”

“I think he’s deaf or a special dog.” Brad coughed. “Not sure.” He handed her a bottle of water. “I found him.”

“He’s weird.”

“I know.” Brad finished his pipe and, again, reached into his supplies. “Fruit snacks.” He tossed her a pack.

“Looney Tunes?” She smiled and peered at his stuff. “What else do you have besides guitars?”

“Good amount of water. Traveling food. Some kick-ass beef sticks my mom makes.”

“Have any of those?”

“I do. Want one?”

“Maybe for dinner. These will work, thanks.” She opened her pack.

“So, you like being a soldier?” Brad asked.

“I’m not a soldier. I’m a Marine.”

“What’s the difference?”

Her nostrils flared. “You ready to go? It’s been five minutes.”

“Wow, attitude.” Brad looked at the dog. “She has attitude because I asked her what the difference was. I mean, she’s a soldier.”

“I told you I’m a Marine. There’s a big difference. Mentality. Training. Branches of the services.”

Brad stood; his flip-flops felt good on his feet. “Ok, but aren’t all military people soldiers?”

“What? No.” She shook her head. “If you’re in the Army, you’re a soldier; Marine Corps, a Marine. Air force, Airman. Navy, Seaman.”

Brad snickered.

“What?” She asked.

“You said Seaman. Really?”

“Oh my God. How old are you?”

“Thirty-three.”

She shook her head, fruit snacks in hand, and she turned and started walking.

“Hey!” Brad grabbed the handle of the wagon. “Wait. Why are you irritated?”

“Because you laughed when I said Seaman.”

Brad snickered again.

She tossed out her hand with a slap to her leg. “I give up.” And she continued to walk.

“Sorry,” Brad hurried to catch her, but he couldn’t help it; a little high, he snickered again. She picked up her pace.

When Rita was asked to watch Sonya as if she were a child, she had no idea what that entailed. She knew Sonya wasn't the brightest bulb in the bunch, and Randy just needed her occupied until he and Grant returned from Miles Town.

Rita was worried; she was one of the few people who knew about the odd deaths. But she knew probably as much as her husband for the time being. She was grateful he was going into Miles to see what they knew. Grant was reasonable. He would decipher the facts and stay calm about presenting them.

However, until he and Randy returned, she was left to babysit Sonya.

It was going to be a long afternoon. Rita knew that the second Sonya walked in, her heels click clacking on the hardwood floors. She wore form-fitting blue jeans and a sleeveless shirt. Her hair was styled perfectly, make up applied just right, and she carried a sweet aroma from the light perfume she wore. Sonya acted as if she were heading for a night on the town instead of food preservation.

Somehow, Rita knew that slicing potatoes wasn't going to be an easy task for her.

Rita saw that when she gave Sonya a knife, and she awkwardly fiddled with it so as not to mess up her nails.

Rita paused in her slicing when she heard the first truck roll down the street, the voice blasting over the bullhorn stating there was an urgent town meeting at the fire hall at five p.m. Rita already knew about the meeting, but somehow hearing it was far too eerie.

The lack of technology bothered her, but not as much as other people, and it bothered Grant even less. He, of all people, hated technology, and avoided it at all costs. The loss of internet, cable and so forth was not even a minor inconvenience to him.

Some folks probably would go as far as to say that Grant and Rita wouldn't miss a beat in the breakdown of society; their lives would change very little.

Maybe Grant's would change very little, but Rita knew she would miss her television shows, her cell phone, and those little word games she played against her friend in Colorado. When she asked Grant to play the game with her, he scoffed and broke out the Scrabble board, stating, "That's a game, not that contraption," as he pointed to her phone.

Rita was fine, though Sonya, on the other hand, was having a heck of a time with that lone potato she had been slicing for a while.

She was a third of the way through when Rita was already on her fifth or sixth.

Sonya held the knife with her middle finger and thumb, and without bracing the potato at all, sawed gently and slowly. She grunted when the

potato rolled with each slice.

“Are you sure,” Rita asked, “you don’t want my help with that? I can show you.”

“No, no,” Sonya shook her head. “I need to learn this survival skill stuff.”

“Honey, slicing a potato is not a survival skill.”

“You don’t think? If I learn how to make oatmeal, I learned a valuable skill.”

“You didn’t cook much?” Rita asked.

“Not at all.”

“How did you feed your family? Did Randy cook?”

“He can, but ...” Sonya shrugged. “I lied to them. I hired someone to come in and prepare everything; all I had to do was serve and pretend.”

“My God, how did you afford that?”

“I was very rich. A slew of money from my father, but Randy wouldn’t touch it. Why are we slicing potatoes?”

“Because we’re gonna dehydrate them. They’ll go bad if we don’t find a way to preserve them,” Rita said.

“You don’t think eventually things will go back to normal?”

Rita shook her head. “I don’t see how they can. Something big is happening.”

“The flood.”

Rita paused before saying anything. She smiled, pacifying. “Yes, the flood.”

“I’m a very good swimmer in case the levee breaks. I was on the ...” She tilted her head. “Why is that woman wandering in your backyard?”

Rita wasn’t facing the window. Setting down her knife, she turned around. In the yard, a woman walked in a staggering manner. Her hair dangled in her face as she moved aimlessly toward the end of the property. Rita stared at her for a second then turned back around, walked to the kitchen door, and locked it.

Sonya stood and walked to the window. “Aren’t you going to find out why she’s out there?”

“No.” Rita picked up her knife. “She’s heading off the property, that’s all that matters.”

“She looks ill, maybe we should ...”

“No.” Rita said. “Sit down. Slice potatoes, and let it go.”

Sonya reluctantly agreed, but not without looking out the window one more time and making another comment about the woman’s health.

Sonya didn’t know what happened at Millie’s house and the clinic; Rita did. And because of that, unless Rita knew the person and she looked well, Rita was staying clear of everyone.

A river ran on the east side of Miles Town and a hill on the west, making it like Finleyville, a one main road town. But unlike Finleyville, those in Miles Town weren't as welcoming to travelers and refugees.

The jaunt to Miles didn't take very long. There wasn't any traffic on the road. In fact, they didn't pass one car.

The narrow almost two-lane bridge that welcomed people just before hitting Miles was not welcoming at all. A huge truck blocked the bridge, and two armed men stood before it.

They raised their weapons as Grant and Randy approached.

Grant slowed down and then finally stopped. He reached for his door handle.

"Should we chance it?" Randy asked.

"Eh, I know those boys. They aren't gonna shoot me." He opened the car door and stepped out. "Don't think I won't mention this to your mother that you're holding a gun on me, Bruce Dodger."

Bruce, not much older than twenty-five, lowered his weapon. "Oh, hey, Mr. Mason."

Grant walked toward the barricade; Randy followed a few steps behind.

"Hey, there, Bruce, got the place shut down, I see," Grant said.

Bruce nodded. "Yeah, but that's only for refugees and so forth. You need a place to stay? You're welcome to come through."

"No, no. I'm good, thanks. I need information. We have some shit happening in Finleyville and I wanna compare notes. Who 'round here is the know-all about it?"

"Come on," Bruce gave a wave of his hand. "I'll take ya."

Grant moved his car to the side of the road after instructed to do so. Then he and Randy went with Bruce on foot into Miles City.

Mayor Jean Cummings was a new mayor by Miles Town standards. She'd been in office for eight years, taking over the reins when the previous mayor passed away after twenty-five years of service.

It was at the Bee's End Diner that Grant and Randy met with her. Not that the diner was open; it was a watering hole of sorts for those working for the city. A place for coffee, a bite to eat, and some air conditioning.

She walked in, wearing blue jeans and a tee shirt. Her gray blond hair wasn't in its usual perfect politician style; it was stringy and tucked behind her ears. A woman in her fifties who always looked magazine cover ready,

she looked worn and like she hadn't slept for days.

She probably hadn't.

"You lucked out," she told them. "We had bodies after the first storm. Woke up to no cell phones, cable, computers, nothing. The folks started rushing to the police station reporting a foul odor. I guess about eight families died that first morning."

Grant asked. "Were they localized, all in one area?"

Jean nodded. "Yep. But that next morning it moved, and there were more. It's totally random. At least the affected areas are."

"We did a town sweep and lost about twenty-five percent," Grant said.

Jean chuckled, but not out of humor. "I wish we could do a town sweep, but we have about fifteen thousand people in this town. You guys have not even three."

Randy nodded. "Have you guys made contact with anyone?"

"Yeah, that's why we're shut down, and you should be, too." Jean said. "Grant, you have that old ham, don't you?"

"I do."

"Well, stop at the station and get the call numbers so you can tune in and listen to our guy in Cleveland. Well, outside of Cleveland."

"I'll do that," Grant said. "What do you know? We need information to take back with us."

She sat back some in the booth. "You have to remember, we are piecing things together from testimony and not scientific fact." She pointed a pencil. "What Cleveland tells us, what they heard, what we saw and heard. Whatever this is that is killing our people is contagious if you touch the actual blood or the victim."

Randy said, "We figured that out."

"You realize animals and pets carry it, but aren't symptomatic, at least not yet."

Grant curled his lip. "How do you know this?"

"That was the recent news. One of our people was taking out his dog, got bit, five minutes later he was like the other victims. His wife saw it all. So some of your infections, any that occur outside the circle, may be that."

Grant swiped his hand over his face. "Unreal."

"Yes, well, we're just guessing that the first night is when the pets got it."

Randy shook his head. "What is it? Who is it? Do we know?"

"Nope," Jean said. "No one knows. But whoever did it knocked out communications and so forth to bring us to a halt, so we're sitting ducks. Government knows, trust me, or else they wouldn't have evacuated the cities."

Randy held out his hand. "You're government."

"Unfortunately, I'm mayor of a small town. I'm thinking higher ups." She winked. "And we are almost positive on how it infects large groups. It's not an aerosol; it's more like an x-ray."

This confused Grant, and he looked at Randy before he looked back to Jean. "What do you mean?"

"We have two survivors. A little boy, he is eleven. And a woman. Now, we've had others that lived when everyone else in their homes had died, but within hours, they ended up the same way. But Craig and Nancy... They're fine. They live three streets apart."

"And their families?" Grant asked.

"Dead. See, Craig hid in the closet when the storm hit, was scared. And his story is he fell asleep in there, but the sound of his mother and father moving about for work startled him. He said they worked the early shift so we're figuring this was about five in the morning. Anyhow, just as he was about to open the door, he heard this humming sound as he called it. Said his mother called out, "Oh God, what is that?" and both of his parents screamed."

Grant took a long blink. "And he stayed put."

Jean nodded. "Trust me, we asked him a million questions. He stayed put, scared, as you would expect. Told us the humming grew louder and closer, and a very white light seeped under the closet door. He scooted away from it, didn't make a sound, and within seconds it was gone."

"The woman?" Randy asked.

"Was folding laundry in the basement." Jean said. "Told the same story. Hum, like an electrical current. She didn't see a white light, but she heard her husband scream, and she ducked under the laundry table."

Grant exhaled. "This has been very helpful. It is a lot more than we knew."

"It's the same in Cleveland," Jean said. "This is all new info, we learned it today. Been checking on things since morning. We'll keep you posted."

Randy smiled. "At least we have something to go back and tell our people at the meeting tonight."

"You might wanna also tell them what we told our people," Jean stated.

Grant asked. "What's that?"

"If the storm comes again, stay below, stay hidden, stay quiet ..." Jean said. "Stay alive."

9.

Really, Randy didn't expect a lot of people at Roy's. Even though the establishment was always busy seven days a week, people were worried and staying in. There weren't even that many people at the town meeting, and that disappointed Randy. How were they to be informed, to know what to do? Then again, the 'what to do' was all simply guess work.

Roy didn't see a problem with the light crowd; he wasn't making any money anyhow and said that it would help the alcohol last longer. If need be, he'd break out his father's old still.

It wasn't even six p.m., and it looked as if it were the middle of the night.

Randy didn't plan on staying long. He had Sonya at his apartment working on blocking the windows and finding a quiet place to sleep. He didn't tell her anything, just that something odd was going on, and when the storms came, they had to stay quiet and out of sight.

Of course, speaking to Sonya bordered on unreasonable seeing how she didn't see a connection between hiding and the flood that was coming.

Grant and Rita offered Randy and Sonya a spot in their large basement, at least to stay during the night.

Randy declined.

He wasn't convinced that the happenings weren't resource-connected. In fact, those who died lived near larger resources. In Finleyville it was near Bilks Farm, in Miles Town, it was near the river and a smaller commercial farm.

Time would tell. And as the evening wore on, Randy made his way back to his apartment.

Another storm was approaching; he could feel it. He prayed the next day would bring more information, positive information, and hopefully, no more deaths.

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Rita spent a good part of the evening broom cleaning the basement floor. First, a good sweeping then giving it a bristle scrub using some pine scented cleaner. That was, of course, after she beat the hell out of the old throw rug.

She was doing her best to make it clean. She didn't know if they'd be living down there; she knew at least they'd sleep there, and because of that,

she wanted it livable.

How she wished they had finished the basement as they had talked about all those times. It was a huge basement, three rooms. But every year it was “Next year we’ll do it”, then Bill and Brad moved out, and there was no reason to do it.

Rita recalled discussions about the basement when she and Grant spoke about it being a bomb shelter. They joked, because they stocked it like one. But the stocking was more for natural disasters. Not bombs.

All she knew was that she was getting it ready for long-term use, and for a few others who might have to join them. She hoped one of those people was Brad.

She needed it to be Brad.

Prayer wasn’t a daily thing for her, but it became an hourly occurrence and would continue until she knew her son’s fate.

She wanted them all to stay alive, to survive, and to beat whatever it was they all had to face.

But how does one survive an event when it isn’t even clear what it is that has to be survived?

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Two miles down Route 6 was an auto body shop, and Jess made room in the back storage area.

“I don’t understand why we’re stopping,” Brad said. “Really. We have maybe ten miles to my parents’ house.”

“We have to stop. It’s time to stop.” Jess was firm. “If everything starts again, to stay alive you need to listen to me. Okay?”

Brad shrugged. “Okay.” He paused. “What’s going to start?”

Jess cocked her head at a low rumbling noise. Not quite thunder. “Feel that electricity in the air? That’s the prelude.”

“To?” Brad asked.

She shook her head. “To another event. When I tell you to, stay quiet, stay low, and don’t move.”

“Alright,” Brad agreed.

“And I swear, if your weird dog makes a noise, I’ll break his neck.”

“Okay.” Brad shrugged.

Jess curled her lip. “Don’t you care?”

“He’s not my dog. Besides, I think he’s possessed or something.” Brad bent down. “The only time he made a noise was when the storm started last night, and that was to drag me to a closet.”

This immediately caught Jess’ attention. “He did what?”

“Didn’t make a sound or move all day. Then he got scared of the storm

and kept pulling my pants until we went into a closet ... like this.”

Jess looked at Spunky, who sat, not moving, in the center of the garage. He stared out. “That’s so weird.”

“He’s possessed. And really, thinking about it,” Brad said, “with all that’s happening, doesn’t that make sense?”

“Yeah, it does.”

Brad opened a bottle of whiskey. “Want a sip?”

“Sure, why not.” Jess reached for the bottle. “How did you end up getting left behind?”

Brad fluttered his lips. “As if you have to ask. Really, think about it. Plus when it all happened, I was passed out drunk under a heap of covers. I never heard a thing. What about you?”

After a drink, she handed the bottle to Brad. “I wasn’t really left behind.”

“What do you mean?” Brad asked.

Before answering, Jess looked toward the ceiling. “Listen. It’s getting closer.”

“Doesn’t sound like the storm from last night.”

“Not yet. This is how it starts. Usually it’s further away; you can’t hear that or feel it.”

“Feel what?”

“The electricity in the air. Look at the air on my arms.” She extended her arm. “Standing up.”

“Man, for a chick you have hairy arms.”

She swiftly retracted her arm. “Asshole.”

“Maybe the language was why you were left behind?”

“Huh?” She shook her head. “I wasn’t left behind. I ... left. I ... ran.” She sadly shook her head. “When it began, I was called to go. I was actually on my way, and I ran. I thought of my kids, my husband, and I booked.”

“Whoa. That takes talent. I didn’t think once it started and once you started to go, that anyone could escape the Rapture.”

“Yeah, well ...” Jess started to answer but stopped. “What did you say?”

“I said I didn’t think anyone could escape the Rapture.”

“The Rapture?” She asked. “You think this is the Rapture?”

“Well, yeah. I was left behind.”

“Oh my God. You were left behind, yes, in the evacuation.”

“What are you talking about?”

She chuckled in disbelief. “I cannot believe you think this is the Rapture. That this is all God’s work. All this time we’ve been talking about two different things.” She took hold of his arm. “Come here and be quiet.”

Brad followed her lead. She took him outside and pointed. “Look to the sky. North above the city. You can see it starting.”

Brad turned and peered to where she had indicated. Although he couldn’t see the city skyline, he could see the black cloud above the city which darkened the entire sky. Swirling below the cloud were streaks of white light.

They danced in jagged lines left to right. It looked as if the sky literally rained miniature lightning bolts.

Jess asked. "Does that look like God's work to you?"

"Um, well, actually it does," Brad said innocently.

Jess turned to him. "Well it's not. It's far from God's work." She pulled his arm once again. "Time to get inside."

Brad couldn't help but look at the sky. "What is it, then?"

Jess didn't answer; she quickly just led him inside.

10.

With each passing night, the storms grew worse. The sky lit up even more than the previous night, and the ground rumbled.

It was when he realized that there wasn't a drop of rain or wind or even change in temperature that Randy determined it wasn't a storm. Not one that he knew.

His mind kept going to solar storms or flares; something like that would light up the sky. But it wouldn't make people turn to mush.

Grant had promised to let him know as soon as he was able to make contact with the radioman outside of Cleveland. Randy needed to know more than just a news update; he needed to know where outside of Cleveland the man was located.

His sons were outside of Cleveland, and if Randy could just find out how they were, he could sleep easier.

He was afraid to move the night before, afraid to make a sound, but he couldn't fall asleep, so he tackled half of a bottle of whiskey. Sonya took a sleeping pill, she had some in her purse, but she took the pill, grabbed a blanket, and went into the master bedroom closet.

She didn't accept his earlier explanation and bothered him until he told her that something came in the storm and killed people.

"That's all I needed to know," she said. "It's killing people."

After that, she didn't say a word.

The semi-lit sky was a happy sign to Randy; he wasn't a pile of mush. He wondered if those who were hit felt a lot of pain. He assumed they did; he'd heard the doctor's cry of agony.

Dehydrated, Randy sought out a big glass of water. He was amazed at what he saw on the kitchen counter and the things packed for survival. He still was in the dark on that sort of stuff and so was Sonya; the items were courtesy of Rita.

It was as he took a healthy swallow of water that he thought about Sonya and actually had a freak-out moment.

He set down the glass and hurried to the bedroom, reaching for the closet.

His insides shook, and he was fearful of opening the door. There was little love lost between them, but he didn't want to see his ex-wife turned into a pile of that stuff.

Slowly he opened that closet door and peeked in. Sonya was sleeping and turned away when the light from the bedroom seeped in.

Randy sighed in relief and closed the closet.

They were alive. They made it through another night. Then the thought hit him, how long would it be before it wasn't just the night, but every minute of the day.

Randy didn't think that was far off.

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They were on the road before the sun was fully up. It was a quiet walk, and for the first morning in a long time, Brad didn't start his day by getting high. Ironically, it was the first morning he probably needed it the most.

Jess didn't say much; she didn't need to. The night before, she alluded to the truth and Brad didn't push her. Possibly, because he was fearful of knowing what she knew. And she did know things.

After Brad saw the light show, they slipped inside, and Jess told him that she wanted to give him the low down before they settled in for the night, before they had to be quiet. But she wouldn't have time to tell him all of it.

Just in case.

Just in case what? Brad wondered, and then the first boom rang out. They inched back into an alcove of sorts, and Spunky, unlike the night before, didn't hide.

He ran.

He didn't bark or jump, he took off running. Out the door and into the street. Brad tried to chase him, despite what he said about not caring. However, Jess stopped him.

She started to tell him, and then the booming grew louder and they stayed silent.

Things only grew worse.

Neither of them slept; they just stared, not making a sound.

When silence finally fell, they waited little longer and then packed to leave.

Not fifty feet into their journey, Brad's heart dropped when he found Spunky's collar. Just the collar. There weren't remnants of mush like he found in the cars, only the collar. He lifted it, stared at the nametag, then placed the collar in his bag that was in the wagon.

"You aren't saying much," Jess stated as she walked ahead.

"Not much to say."

"No questions?"

"I have them. I just don't feel like asking them now." Brad said. "I just want to get to my parents' home and see if they're okay."

"I know that feeling. I want to ..." Jess stopped speaking when a series of three beeps rang out. "Oh, sweet." She breathed out.

Brad watched her rummage excitedly through her pockets. She pulled out a thin gadget, flat, a few inches square. "Is that a phone?"

"No. A com device." She replied. "We're still alive."

"Of course, we're still alive," Brad said. "We're walking ..."

"No. Not us. I meant my squad. They're still alive." Her fingers moved as if she were text messaging. "They're looking for me. What is the name of the town again?"

"Finleyville."

"Thanks."

"How ..." Brad inched to her. "How do you have a cell signal? Are the signals back up?"

"No." She shook her head. "This is a special frequency." With a 'bleep', she put the device back in her pocket. "A special communications device."

"Maybe the cell phones are back."

"They aren't," Jess said.

"Maybe they are, and we just don't know."

"They aren't." Jess stated again.

"How do you know?" Brad asked.

"Because we knocked out all satellites three days ago." Her words, calm and matter of fact, came from her as if it were common knowledge.

To Brad this was even more confusing. He started to ask who the 'we' was, and why they knocked out the satellites, but he stopped.

He didn't feel like hearing answers he wasn't ready to accept.

Jess had told him it wasn't God, and she told him what it was.

The simple truth was hard enough to comprehend, and it cast an even gloomier shadow on the prospects of finding his parents alive and well.

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Rita had grown depressed. No matter how many times Grant had reassured her that they were fine, alive, she didn't care.

"How long? Really?" she said. "Whatever is going on, it's forcing us to hide."

"I know." Grant nodded.

"I don't want to hide the rest of my life."

"Maybe it'll change. If not," Grant said. "What can we do? I mean if we want to stay alive ..."

She was about to break down, give into emotions when the thump above them made her cock back. "Someone's here."

"Stay put." Grant inched to the stairs.

"Grant," she whispered in warning.

He held out his hand as he lifted his rifle. "Stay." Then he crept up the steps quietly.

Rita stayed put. She listened to her husband go upstairs, open the door, and she feared for him. Her mind swirled in recollection of the story of the woman in Miles that stayed in the basement and hid.

Just as she was about to say, "no more" and go up with her husband, Grant called down.

"Rita! It's Brad."

Brad!

A rush of adrenaline filled Rita, and as if her knee never ached, she flew up those stairs with her heart racing.

There was her son, looking good, standing in the living room with some woman in uniform. Who the woman was at that moment, Rita didn't care.

Brad was in an embrace with his father when Rita intruded. "Oh God," she gushed. "Thank God you're alive."

Brad grinned. "No, Mom, thank God you are alive."

"You made it out of the city," Grant stated. "Both of you?"

Brad nodded.

Grant asked. "What's happening there? What did you see?"

Before Brad could answer, the whoop of a siren rang out, drawing everyone's attention.

Grant walked to the door. "Stew's out there."

Rita gasped. "Oh God, more people?"

Grant shook his head.

Stew stepped from the police car and hollered. "Hey, Grant, you need to come to Bilks. Please. You have to see this. Meet me at the warehouse."

And that was all he said. He quickly got back in the squad car and sped off.

The reunion was short lived. Before Rita could register what was going on, Grant was heading to the door. He announced he would be back, but that wasn't good enough for Rita. She wasn't going to accept being third party to information any longer.

Wasting no time, she followed Grant. Brad and his soldier friend were right behind.

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Grant didn't know what to expect. The warehouse was where they had taken the bodies. He drove Rita, his son, and the new woman in his truck. They arrived at Bilks a few minutes later.

Barely enough time for Grant to tell Brad the warehouse is where they

had stored the bodies.

Driving up the hill to the warehouse, Grant didn't need to question why he was summoned.

He saw it.

The police car parked at the end of the driveway, not too close to the warehouse, alongside Randy's car.

Both Stew and Randy stared at the warehouse, scratching their heads dumbfounded.

The once huge wooden structure was buried. The building where they placed the soft, unrecognizable human remains had been transformed.

Vine-like branches, gray and green in color, extended from the bottom of the warehouse and grew, literally overnight, not only over the building, but wrapped around it, strangling it with growth.

They were an odd color; a death green would be the best way Grant would describe it.

Small black flowers began to bud on the ends that pointed toward the sky.

It carried a stench that was similar to vinegar, and even at a distance from the warehouse it was pungent.

"What the hell?" Grant blurted out.

Stew shook his head. "This happened last night."

Randy asked. "What is it? What happened to our bodies?"

Grant turned to his son. "Brad, did you see anything like this in the city?"

Brad shook his head. "No. Not at all."

Grant sighed out. "Well, we have to find out what happened. Maybe someone knows. We'll start calling out on the radio."

"No need," Brad said and then turned to Jess. "I brought a lot of your answers with me."

11.

Just as the splash of whiskey covered the bottom of her glass, Jess lifted it to her lips and stated the word, “Terraform.”

While most people had coffee, the informal meeting at Roy’s served up a dash of calm in the form of alcohol.

“I didn’t get to explain this to Brad in full. But basically what is happening right now is terraforming.”

Stew shook his head. “I don’t understand that.”

Brad explained. “It’s when a planet is made inhabitable by another planet.”

Rita snapped her fingers. “I saw that on the Discovery Channel. Like saying if Earth found a second planet, we’d have to send a team to colonize it, to plant so we could live there.”

Jess nodded. “That’s what’s happening now. Earth is being terraformed for another planet. We think ... or I’ve been told that this isn’t the first time it’s been terraformed.”

“Who’s doing it?” Grant asked.

With a slam of a bottle to the bar, Roy stated. “Aliens. I told you the other night, it was aliens. Man ...” he shook his head.

Grant turned to Jess. “How do you know all this?”

She placed her communications device on the bar and slid it to Stew. “For the last fifteen years I have served as an EEF Marine. Elite Extermination Force. We are chosen early in our career and sworn to secrecy. We train, we deploy, we wait. We knew this would happen, just didn’t know when. I’m only informed as an EEF. My intelligence about it is limited. What I am telling you is what I was told during training and what I learned over the last few weeks.”

“Few weeks!” Rita blasted. “They’ve known for weeks.”

Jess shook her head. “Decades. We’ve been preparing for decades. Ready for decades. We aren’t the only ones out there; neither is this civilization that is trying to terraform us. What I learned is that we received intelligence from another life form about these ‘farmers’. They perceive the overpopulation of one of their planets, find another, terraform it, and move their people here. Problem is Earth is a little more advanced than most, so this other world gave us the heads up that we were next. I hate to say it’s not an extermination process, because they don’t know what’s here. They terraform by using the life already here us. It’s done on a bigger scale, like what we’ve been seeing, then they do sweeps. Which I think aren’t far off because I

think we're losing the battle to hold them off."

Randy had been silent, taking it all in. He swiped his hand down his face. "We're battling them? How? Where?"

Jess pointed upward. "The flashes of lights in the sky, that's the fighting."

Rita tilted her head. "That's odd, because when my boys were younger and there'd be thunder and lightning, I used to joke and tell them it was aliens."

Brad finished her sentence. "Better up there than down here."

"Now, it's both," Jess hung her head.

Randy asked. "How are we fighting up there? I can't believe we have the technology to do so."

"We do," Jess said. "Have had it for a while. We first learned about this hostile civilization when we went to the moon. The message came through. Since then all space technology has gone toward building a defense. We never stopped going to the moon; we built there. Also built a defense platform."

"All the shuttle trips?" Grant asked. "Were they for this platform?"

Jess nodded. "Actually, we learned that the information leaked about it all in the 80s. President Reagan's code word 'Star Wars' was a big thing. He covered, made it sound like a ridiculous missile defense system, and everyone chalked it up to his crazy ideas. It's a global effort with a fighting force of thirty thousand."

Stew commented, "That's not many in the scheme of things."

"No, it's not," she said. "But the firing power doesn't need ground forces. We have a secret satellite system; everything else we knocked out so they couldn't use them against us. They now have to search us out, using sensors to find us, instead of locking in on us. And from what I learned, the sensors don't really work during the day. And, they can't come down here. It's not conducive to life for them, hence the terraforming."

"Then there's the solution," Brad said. "If they can't live here, they won't stay or keep trying. Poison the living source." Everyone looked at him. "Really. If we were terraforming a planet, we'd do what? Plant trees to increase the amount of oxygen. If I were an inhabitant of that planet, I'd kill the trees and poison the food source growing and anything else sustainable to their life. That's what we need to do." He turned to Jess. "Are they thinking on those lines?"

She shrugged. "I'm only on the fighting force. I would assume they are."

Grant said. "Let's assume they're not. We as humans are obviously the base source for their planet transformation, considering our remains are like fertilizer right now. I think we're the starting point. What about us makes us useful for their plan? What inside of us are they tapping into?"

Rita fluttered her lips. "So we poison ourselves."

"No." Grant shook his head. "We need to find out what it is and do something to those things they're growing."

Randy suggested. “Why don’t we burn them?”

“What are they?” Grant asked. “Do you know? I don’t. We need to take it down quietly and from within. We fire up that warehouse, we may invite the war to come on down here or invite trouble. No, that age old saying, we have to learn about our enemy to beat it. We need to learn it. And that warehouse at Bilks is the starting point.”

12.

Sonya carried a mint-condition hockey card in the lining of her purse. It was encased in plastic. She picked it up from a collector for her son, Randy Jr., and had all intentions of giving it to him for his birthday.

It was one of the few items she grabbed when they evacuated her. Randy Jr. had looked high and low for that card, and Sonya was proud she'd found it.

Now she wondered if she would ever get to give it to him.

She had packed some items, not much; she didn't bring much with her. She did take some water and food items, and wearing her comfortable slacks, a nice shirt, and natural makeup, Sonya was ready to go.

She saw the look on Randy's face when he returned to the apartment. His eyes shifted to her furry bag, purse, and blue plastic bag of food on the couch.

"Going somewhere?" he asked.

"I'm going to find our sons," Sonya said. "You're welcome to come with me."

"Sonya, you can't do that," Randy closed the door. "It's not safe."

"Well, is it safe here?" she asked. "I slept in that closet last night for fear of something. You won't tell me what it is. But is it worse out there?"

"Probably." Randy said. "There's gonna come a time when the closet won't be good enough for hiding. You can't be out on the road if that time comes."

She tilted her head. "Don't you care?"

"Care about what?"

"Our sons."

"Of course, I care about our sons. But they are resourceful. They're tough."

"Then they can take care of me," she lifted her chin, "because Lord knows I'm not resourceful or tough."

Randy lifted his hands out. "What do you think I'm doing here?"

"Passing me off, leaving, and that's fine." Sonya nodded. "It really is. You have no obligation to me."

"I'm trying, Sonya. I'm trying to help out this town and keep people safe, and that includes you. I'm trying."

"I know you are," Sonya said, stepping to him. She placed her hand on his face. "But as a mother, I need to find my sons."

"How are you going to get to Ohio? Walk?"

"Oh, heavens no. None of my shoes are sensible enough for walking." She smiled and then the smile dropped. "I spoke to Rita. She understands

where I'm coming from. She's going to lend me her car."

Randy moistened his lips. "You really are going to go look for the boys."

"Unless you tell me the radio man in Cleveland knows something."

Randy shook his head. "He didn't."

"Then I really am going." Sonya reached for her things. "I would love a ride to Grant and Rita's."

"I can do that."

"Good. Thank you." Sonya walked to the door and opened it.

"But ..." Randy followed her. "Before you go, I'm gonna tell you the truth about what is going on."

Sonya glanced up at him with curious eyes as Randy closed the door.

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Mayor Jean made remarkable time arriving in Finleyville. She came with her own chief of police. They were to meet with Stew and the new woman. Jess was an information source in a darkened world with no means of communication.

"I'm retired Navy, so I know the limits of your information," Jean said. "Thank you for sharing. It's obvious they don't want to cause destruction."

Stew nodded. "I agree. If they are battling with firepower up there, they could easily fire down here." He turned to Jess. "Or can't they?"

"Oh, they can," Jess replied. "But burning everything out isn't what they want. Eventually, if they win, they'll dismantle what we have. This is what we are told. But no other civilization has been as advanced as us."

"So they're getting a fight," Jean stated. "They weren't ready?"

Jess shook her head. "Not at all. But they're still able to break through with their biological weapon."

"Tell me how this works," Jean requested.

"It works with energy. It sweeps via a sensor, picking up sound and movement. It kind of pulses at the person, from what I have seen," Jess explained. "It starts with what looks like electrical surges under their ships, and they have plenty hovering. The rays branch out. That's why they haven't hit large areas."

Stew said. "You mentioned you don't see that as being far off."

Jess shook her head. "On every planet there is something that hinders them from doing big sweeps. We occupy them at night so they can't focus on the ground. The sensors do not work in the daylight, as I said. But if they gain ground or figure out how to hit during the day, we're all in trouble or all going underground."

"For how long?" Jean tossed up her hands. "I don't want to hide forever."

Stew agreed. “Hopefully we won’t. Hopefully, we’ll figure out how to contaminate what they are creating, and they’ll just go away.”

Jean turned to Jess. “Will it be that easy?”

“The going away?” Jess asked. “I don’t know. Perhaps. But the contaminating part ... I’m not a scientist and I don’t know of one.”

Stew exhaled. “Just wished we had a way of knowing what’s going on now.”

No sooner did he say that, one of his officers burst in the room. “Sheriff,” he said out of breath. “Two soldiers just peeled into town. They need to see her.” He pointed to Jess.

“Where are they?” Jess asked. “Why didn’t you bring them?”

The officer answered. “One of them is injured really bad, the other said he needed to tend to him somewhere. I took them to the clinic. Wendy is there.”

Jess looked with question to Stew. “The clinic?”

Stew stepped before her with a motion of his head. “Let’s go.”

Jess followed him out with Jean and her police chief right behind.

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Blood flowed from the soldier’s leg where his leg had been amputated just below the knee.

“I wanted to cauterize it, but I was fearful of what I’d seal in there,” Sergeant Mace said to Wendy, the Nurse Practitioner who now worked the clinic alone. “I did the best I could after I amputated.”

“You amputated?” she asked, surprised, as she moved quickly, grabbing a large bottle of sterilized water, and pouring it over the wound.

The soldier who was down was Mediterranean, with darker skin. His eyes had rolled back, and he had passed out.

“Yeah, I had no choice. I figured I got it before it traveled, and it does travel fast,” Mace replied.

“What does?”

“The microbe weapon. It hit his foot, I had a hand ax and I just chopped. He passed out, and I hit him with morphine.”

She had several small clamps. “This is way out of my league; like you I’m doing the best I can.” She exhaled slowly from her mouth and, because she was shorter, stood on a small box to be above her patient. Ripping sterilized Kelly clamps from packages, she clamped ligaments, veins, and arteries. “I have to use Quick Clot on this until we figure out how to handle this.”

“What do you need me to do?” Mace asked.

“You’re fine. I think I have it.” With a deep breath, she undid the

tourniquet and reached for a syringe. "I'm gonna keep him sedated. I think Miles Town still has an operational hospital. Not sure."

Jean's voice entered the room. "They do. We only have two doctors. But can he make the trip?"

Wendy exhaled and stepped off her box. "Yeah. I think he's stabilized, but he has to go now."

"We have my pickup," Jean said. "We can take him."

Mace went from helping his brother-in-arms to looking at a room full of people. Then he spotted Jess. "Gilman!"

Jess rushed in and gave a hearty embrace to Mace. "So good to see you."

"Yeah, well, thank you for telling us where you were," Mace said. "We were on the run when we were hit. Lassiando got it bad, but I think I caught it before it ate him."

Jess gave a swat to his arm. "Excellent, but ... it's day time."

"Yeah," Mace nodded. His lifted his dark eyes to those in the room. "And when you move him, you gotta move everyone. Out of sight, below, whatever you do. And soon. Like an hour. Tops."

Jess was confused; before anyone else could ask, she did. "What happened?"

"They not only figured out how to work the sensors in the day ..." Mace paused. "They broke through. We retreated to concentrate on the other side of the world. The US is vulnerable. The sweeps have begun. You can see the crafts. Hear them. Out in Los Angeles they said they sweep by, hit what who they can, and move on. So you don't have to stay quiet or hid for long."

Jean added. "Until they come back for another sweep."

Mace nodded. "That's a guess. But even when the crafts aren't around ... there's the day sensors. They're everywhere now. They're the intimate pick-offs, one person at a time. That's how Lassiando got it."

"What are they?" Jess asked.

"The scariest part of it all ..." Mace shifted his eyes around the room. "They're using us."

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Randy gave an 'up' nod of his head to Lloyd Green as they left the building; he really didn't want to make idle conversation with him. Lloyd was on his way out, too. He was one of the few people Randy knew from the apartment building, only because Lloyd was a patron at Roy's: The only patron who went there to drink soda and talk. And he talked too much.

If he was going to speak, Randy would speak to Sonya to get her to change her mind.

"Wish you'd change your mind," Randy whispered as he escorted Sonya

outside. "With all that's going on."

"All the more reason," Sonya said.

"Leaving town?" Lloyd asked.

Randy cringed.

Sonya answered. "I'm going to search for my sons."

"That's good. Good luck, you two," Lloyd said.

"He's not going," Sonya said.

"Why not?" Lloyd asked.

"Because I'm not." Randy snapped and tugged Sonya by the arm toward the truck.

"Randy, stop pulling me; I don't move fast in heels." She barked. "God."

"Sorry. I just didn't feel like talking." Randy paused at the truck.

"I appreciate you taking me."

"It's the least I can do," Randy said.

"No, it's not. You can ..." Sonya's words trailed as her eyes slowly shifted.

"What's wrong?" Randy asked.

"That woman." Sonya pointed. "She was wandering in Rita's yard yesterday. Just wandering, like now."

Randy looked at the longhaired woman who moved slowly toward Lloyd.

"I think she's sick and needs help." Sonya stopped and turned around. "Excuse me. Miss!"

The woman slowly peered over her head. Her face was pale, and her eyes were dark and masked in circles.

"Wait." Randy pulled Sonya back. "Don't go near her. Something's wrong."

"She needs help." Sonya argued. "Oh, look, Lloyd is helping her."

There was something about the woman that didn't ring right. Randy knew it, but before he could holler to Lloyd, it was too late.

Lloyd approached the woman. As soon as he did, she opened her mouth. A black vomit-like substance rolled from her lips; with a heave of her body, she projected the substance onto Lloyd.

Lloyd screamed horrendously. The substance blasted him nonstop, as if it had an endless supply. His legs buckled and gave away, as his entire lower body turned into a thick liquid. Just when he hit the concrete, a white light came from the woman, and within a split second she was mere remains on the ground with Lloyd fast on his way to becoming like her.

Randy had never heard Sonya scream so deep and loud, a scream of pure fear that came from her chest. Hurriedly, Sonya still screaming, Randy edged her into the car. He raced to the driver's door, seeing Lloyd once more.

All that remained was his head.

Opening the door, Randy stopped.

"Randy?" Sonya called. "Randy, hurry. Get us out."

The hum. The electronic hum, mixed with a slow motor noise, filled the air. It sounded like a steady moving train.

Breezes with an electrical feel swept by him, and Randy peered over his shoulder and looked up.

“Oh my God.” Eyes not moving from the sky, Randy yelled, “Move now. Get out.”

“What?” Sonya asked

Randy spun. “Out of the car; we have to get inside and below.”

“I don’t”

Thinking, screw it, Randy raced to her side and flung open her door, yanking Sonya from the car. “Now! He yelled. “In the building!”

He pulled her from the car so hard that she fell to the ground.

With Randy’s aid, she stood, then Sonya saw what Randy did and repeated his sentiments of “Oh My God.”

In the distance, a dark cloud moved quickly in the direction of Finleyville. Even though at first glance it looked like some sort of weird weather phenomenon, it was clear that a large metal object emerged further from its personal shroud the closer it moved.

A wind of static electricity whipped around them; it sent needle-like shocks across Randy’s skin.

“Run!” Randy ordered, holding on to Sonia.

She moved with awkwardness. “I ... I can’t ... the heels ...”

With a grunt, and one more look at the approaching craft, Randy swept Sonya into his arms and carried her at top speed into the building.

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Grant and Brad approached the final well on Grant’s property. He had to check the levels, seeing how they hadn’t had rain in nearly a week.

“I’m surprised the levels are holding,” Grant said, reaching for the handle. As soon as his fingers touched the metal, a loud zap sent a shock through him and knocked him back.

“Dad?” Brad raced to him. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah, yeah.” Grant shook his head. “There’s nothing electrical here. What the hell would ...” His eyes shifted upward. “Holy shit.”

“What?” Brad asked then looked over his shoulder as Grant stood. “Oh God.” He grabbed his father’s arm. “Run.”

Both men bolted over the crest of the property and to the back of the house, blasting inside.

“Rita!” Grant barked. “Down below.”

Rita was at the sink; she shut off the water and turned around. “What’s going on?”

Grant opened the basement door. "They're here."

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The first horrific cry of pain from outside the building was the first and only warning they had in the clinic. They were lifting Lassiando from the table when they heard it.

Mace shot a glance to Jess as the second cry rang out. "The craft is here."

"What do we do?" Jess asked.

"We have to hide. Now. Be quiet."

Jean spun to Wendy. "Do they have a basement here?"

"No, we ..." Wendy's eyes widened. "The storage closet in the back. That's a shot."

"Lead the way," Jean ordered. She followed, helping as best as she could with moving the injured soldier to the back. She paused when neither Stew nor her officer from Miles followed. "Come on!"

Stew held out his hand. "I'm coming. Give me a second. I have to just see." He waved them on. "Go. This is my town; I have to see what's taking it down."

He waited until they moved down the hall, and then Stew and the officer from Miles slowly made their way to the front of the clinic.

It was a decision Stew had made so he could be informed.

It was a bad decision.

He and the officer were visible through the lobby windows of the clinic, and the warm, electric-filled white light hit them both.

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They could have been ten feet away; that was how loud the screams were that loud.

Randy made it to the basement with Sonya and to the farthest storage unit. No window was near.

It was an open unit. Randy new the superintendant used it for storage, and he pulled Sonya inside and behind two boxes.

They sat there with Randy holding Sonya in his arms. He brought his hand around and covered her mouth, just in case.

He could feel her shake as her tears streamed down over his fingers. Her hands gripped his so tightly that her nails drew blood.

They sat holding tight to each other, huddled and quiet, listening to the sounds of painful torture, and waiting, just waiting for it to be over.

13.

Randy heard three phases of sounds as he and Sonya huddled in the basement storage room.

Screams. The movement of the crafts.

Then, finally, silence.

It was quiet for a while. Every time he tried to get away from Sonya to go check, she clenched tightly to him, not letting him leave.

Finally, after an hour of hearing nothing, Randy pulled away from her. There was a small window at the other end of the basement. He had to find out what was going on.

He peeked as cautiously as he could through the corner of the window. It faced the street. He saw movement. A car went by.

Randy turned. "I'm heading out."

Sonya only shook her head.

"People are driving. I have to go see. Wait here."

She shook her head drastically and crawled out from the hiding spot.

"Sonya ..."

She grabbed on to his arm, still not speaking a word.

Thinking, 'fine, you can go with me', Randy didn't struggle; he just walked out of the basement with Sonya clinging to his arm.

There was no sound at all.

Nothing. Their footsteps echoed as they emerged into the apartment building lobby, and they saw the first sign that all was not well.

A mound of flesh splattered in front of the mailboxes.

Sonya turned into Randy, and he led her out, trying to shield her eyes,.

"It's the same out here," he said. "You might as well stop hiding your eyes."

Across the parking lot were remains by cars, only a few piles, people who were killed as they tried to make their escape.

Randy wondered how many were in their apartment building and how long he and Sonya had until the smell was unbearable.

There weren't enough people in Finleyville to clean up the mounds.

Randy took Sonya to the car; the doors to his vehicle were still open.

They had to go into town to find out anything.

That was their only option.

Grant and Brad were the first to leave their home as soon as it was silent.

Brad had learned from Jess that the aliens didn't sweep around, they just swept across, hovering only a few moments, getting what they could, and moving on.

Brad was anxious to find Jess. Last he knew she was at the clinic with the injured soldier, and that was when everything went down.

He and Grant went on foot the three blocks and nearly stumbled when they reached the main street. Brad was shocked; it was reminiscent of what he saw on his journey to his parents.

Mounds of flesh were everywhere. Cars had crashed; it was obvious that the drivers were struck down without warning.

It had crossed his mind that he and his father, along with their mother, were the only ones remaining. No one else had emerged.

How many perished? How many didn't make it?

"This is incredible," Grant stammered. "How is this happening?"

Brad shook his head. He hadn't even told his father about the bodies on Saw Run Road.

As they stood there, remains of their fellow townspeople encircling them, people started to emerge from hiding.

Brad spotted Jess and rushed to her with relief.

She walked out of the clinic with another soldier and Jean, the Miles Town mayor.

Jean covered her mouth with her hand, turning left to right.

Grant brushed by Brad and walked to Jean. "Where's Stew?" Grant asked.

Jean shook her head.

Brad closed his eye for a moment and joined his father. "You guys ok?"

Jess nodded. "We have to get an injured man to Miles. There's a hospital there. Can you guys help?"

"I can," Brad answered. "Dad, can I take the van?"

Grant nodded. "But please, get right back here."

Jean whispered out. "That's if there's anyone left in Miles. Oh my God." She looked around. "Look at the bodies."

Brad did. Everyone did. And he was certain that everyone was thinking the same. What were they going to do with all the bodies? They had to figure out something. It was probably a sure bet that plant life would grow from the remains as they had done at Bilks warehouse.

And with the amount of bodily remains that lay everywhere, if they didn't do something, it wouldn't be long before Finleyville looked like an alien forest.

14.

Randy and Sonya only made it as far as the main street to discover that most people rallied there to see who remained.

It wasn't a good time for Sonya to search out her sons. Aside from that, she wasn't in any emotional condition to go anywhere by herself.

She stayed at the fire hall with others while Randy and Grant went on a search. There was no body retrieval because there were too many bodies.

Anyone who felt like coming up with a plan was invited to Roy's that evening before nightfall.

Randy went, only for a few moments, and only to accept the invitation from Grant to stay at his house. It was big enough, the basement was large, and Randy's apartment building, with the heat, smelled pretty bad.

The plan was that he and Sonya would pack, and if it got too late and too dark, they'd head to Grant's the next morning.

Grant wanted Rita at home where it was safe and with Brad and the military duo. The injured man was moved to Miles Town.

Taking a sip of his drink, Grant watched Roy move across the crowded bar and place a paper on the board.

"Miles Town reports approximately 30% loss of population. Cleveland connection hasn't contacted since we retreated." Roy pushed in the thumbtack. "This here will be the news board. Anything I hear, you hear, post it." He ran his hand over his head. "Jean said a lot of the houses are looking like Bilks warehouse. My guess is because we put hundreds of remains in there, we saw it there first."

"So what do we do about it?" Someone shouted. "What about taking the fire hoses and washing the remains away. It stinks out there."

Grant winced. "Those are our neighbors. Or were. No. We can't chance washing it way and it getting into the sewer system and water supply."

"What about destroying what grows," someone else suggested. "Right now we can get ahead of it."

Roy nodded. "We can, but is it a good idea? I mean what's to say they won't retaliate?"

"I still say ..." Grant spoke up. "We need to start with us. What makes us so vital to the growth process? Is it a nutrient in our body? What?"

A man finished his sentiments. "And what can we do to make them not want us?"

"Yes." Grant pointed with a snap of his finger. "Medication, for example,

maybe something as simple as taking more iron. Who knows? It's a selection process, I'm telling you. Why did the few survive in the areas everyone else was killed? Something made them different."

Roy started to speak, but nothing emerged as a local woman shouted into the bar, "Since we have no police force, anyone wanna handle this?" she pointed behind her.

Grant finished his drink and hurried out. Not that he was going to take the reins of being the law, but he certainly was curious.

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The good ol' hometown boys had rallied, and while drinking heavily, spun their trucks in the street, spraying gasoline and lighting the piles of remains aflame.

"Bilks warehouse is blazing," a woman said to Grant.

A man in the back of a pickup fired off a shotgun.

It was insane, Grant thought. What the hell were they thinking? Everywhere there was a mound there was a small fire. The stench of burning flash filled the air, and Grant could see the glow of the huge fire over at Bilks.

"What the hell?" Grant grabbed one of the men. "What are you doing, Cleat?"

"Calling them out. Damn aliens can't be turning us into their feed."

Grant wanted to laugh. "They come millions of miles, hit us from above, and you think you can win with a sawed-off shotgun?"

"I'll go down fighting." Cleat said.

"You'll go down in a pile like the rest of the town," Grant nodded. "You want that? We have to be smart about all this. Now, get your men and stop this."

"Ain't happening, Hoss." Cleat winked. "Every single one of our people who were killed is getting an Indian burial."

"What about the homes? The apartments where there are remains?"

"Fire them up too if we have to."

Grant shook his head. "This is stupid."

"Not stupid. It's fighting back. Just gonna let them turn us into what they want? Well, hell, they can try, we'll just counteract."

Before Grant could try to argue anymore, Cleat jumped in the back of a pickup.

Hooting and hollering as if they were giving a war call to the outer world visitors, the men sped off.

Turning to Roy, Grant exhaled. "I'm heading home. I got a bad feeling."

"Yeah, me too," Roy replied. "Almost like the aliens are gonna say there's plenty more where that came from." He pointed to a burning mound.

“Exactly.” Hands in pockets, Grant took another look as he shook his head in disgust and walked home.

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Sonya tied a rag over her nose to block out the smell. She finished emptying the last cabinet of Randy’s kitchen, and she turned when the door opened. “Last box is ready.”

“Car’s packed, but I just spoke to Grant over this ...” He held up the walkie talkie. “He said either haul ass over there now or get below”

“Is something happening?” Sonya asked.

“It may.” Randy waved her to come to the window. “Take a look.”

Sonya moved slowly. She was far removed from her typically bubbly self. She worried about her sons even more, and she had never been so scared in her entire life.

When she arrived at the window, she was going to question what she was looking for, and then she spotted the orange glow. “What is it?”

Randy faced her. “Dozen of the guys in town have declared war.”

She tilted her head with curiosity.

“You know how I told you they are using us to grow things, using our remains?”

Sonya nodded.

“Well,” Randy continued. “They’re burning the remains before the growing could start.”

“Isn’t that smart?” Sonya asked.

“No, it’s pretty foolish.”

“We’re fighting back in our own way. How is that foolish.”

“It’s not smart fighting, Sonya,” Randy said. “It’s ill-informed fighting. We destroy their work after they have no more resources, not when they still have seventy percent of us left to pick off.”

Sonya exhaled and stopped. “The static.”

“I’m sorry.”

She reached over and touched Randy. A snap accompanied the touch of her finger to his skin. “Static electricity.”

Randy turned to the window. “They’re back.”

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“I miss Sponge Bob! Bring back the goddamn cable!” Rita’s loud voice carried outside.

Mace had a scar over his left eye; it was predominant as he cocked his eyebrow. “She’s lit,” he said to Brad as they, along with Jess, sat on the porch.

“Yeah, well, I can’t recall a time in the last few years where she was

coherent in the evening,” Brad said.

“Why is that?” Jess asked.

“It eases the pain of my brother’s death. She never got over it.” He refreshed Jess’ glass of bourbon and showed the bottle to Mace.

“No.” Mace shook his head. “I’m good. I wanna keep my wits about me. Maybe later.”

“Just let me know. I’ll oblige ya.” Brad filled his glass. “I talk about my mother, but I’m just as bad.”

“My husband drinks,” Jess said. “A lot. He’s not a mean drunk. Jolly.” She sighed. “I plan on going home in a day. I’ll figure out something, maybe stay underground as much as I can.”

Mace nodded. “If you give me a day or so to make sure Lassiando is ok, I’ll go with you.”

“I appreciate ...” Jess’ lifted her head. “What’s that smell?” she stood. “Something is burning.”

Mace stood as well, stepping off the porch. “Sky is orange, I see smoke. It looks like ...” he extended his arm. “You feel that.”

Jess looked down to her arm. “I feel it. Maybe we should get inside.”

From cross the yard, Grant called out and hustled. “That’s a good idea. And make it quick.” He walked by Brad, grabbing the bottle from his hand. “That electrical wind is blowing about. That can only mean one thing.” He opened the screen door. “Mace, shut the lights off. Jess, come with me to the basement. Brad, grab your mother.”

“Oh, great.” Brad shook his head and followed his father inside.

Rita kicked and screamed all the way down the steps.

“I’m not hiding from them alien bastards!” she yelled. “Put me down! You’re as bad as your father!”

Brad had a grip around her waist and set her down in the basement.

Mace barreled down the steps. “We have to be quiet. I heard the hum.”

“Hum this.” Rita gave an up motion of her head. “Give me that bottle.” She reached for the bottle from Grant.

In a whisper, Grant said. “You had enough. Now, be quiet.”

“I’m not staying down here again. I’m not afraid of them.” Rita said in a loud voice.

“Mom,” Brad spoke through clenched jaws. “Please.”

She swung out at him.

“Mrs. Mason,” said Mace. “We need to be quiet.” He looked to the ceiling. “Hear that.”

Every one listened.

The hum.

Rita neared the steps.

“Mom.” Brad pulled her back.

Rita shrieked.

Mace asked Grant, "How much more booze will it take to knock her out?"

Jess said, "I'll do it without booze."

Grant grew frustrated and unnerved; he rubbed his eyes.

"You're not hitting my mother," Brad said.

"You wantus to all die?" Jess asked.

"No, but she's ..."

"Rita!" Grant called out.

Rita raced up the stairs. Grant began to follow, but Mace stopped him. "I got her. I'll get her, I promise."

Without giving anyone a chance to follow, Mace raced after Rita.

Upstairs the hum was even louder. The electrical feel of the air was strong, and as Mace emerged from the stairs, he felt the breeze.

The front door.

He spotted Rita standing there, just standing.

He wasn't going to call or scream to her; his plan was just to run, grab her, and with a hand over her mouth and nose, bring her back to the basement.

But the second he implemented that plan, Rita stepped through the door.

Mace winced as she tumbled. He hoped she passed out, and he hurried to her. When he arrived at the door, he reached down to Rita. She lifted to her knees, and looked outward. "Oh God."

Mace saw it as well.

A huge bright warm light approached.

It didn't take long. Mixed with the loud hum of the engine, from their hiding place in the basement they heard Mace scream.

Jess backed against the wall and slid to the floor. She closed her eyes tightly.

Brad lowered his head, and Grant buried his face in his hands.

They stayed that way, not moving, barely breathing, for over an hour. Holding, as best as they could, any emotions until it was over.

No noise. No hums. Not even in the distance.

They weren't apprehensive to go upstairs. Grant led the way; he turned into the hall from the cellar stairs and saw that the front door was open.

His heart dropped. It was quiet. He knew what he'd see.

He got to the door at the same time as Jess.

There was a pile of remains on the front of the porch. It had to be Mace.

Because Rita was still there.

“Mom!” Brad reached.

“Wait!” Grant stopped him. “She’s not moving. Before you touch her, we have to make sure she’s not one of the new carriers. Jess, hand me that umbrella.”

Jess just stared at Mace’s remains. It was apparent that she couldn’t concentrate on anything but the loss of her friend.

“Jess!” Grant snapped.

“I’m sorry.” She turned her head; a tear ran down her cheek.

Brad handed Grant the umbrella.

Cautiously, Grant stepped to Rita and poked her mid-section.

Rita groaned.

Grant poked her once more.

“Ow, knock it off,” she grumbled and lifted her head.

Grant’s eyes widened and he immediately lifted Rita from the porch, bringing her inside. He set her on the couch. “How are you?”

“I’m fine.” Rita said. “The soldier boy ...”

“What did you see?” Grant asked.

“I fell and the light was there. I ... I saw ...” She paused. “It’s fuzzy.”

Grant breathed out in relief, peering to his son. “You know why they didn’t kill her or infect her, right?”

“She’s old?” Brad guessed.

“No!” Grant barked.

“You think she has cancer?” Brad asked.

Grant grumbled. “No.”

Then Jess said it. “She’s drunk.”

Grant nodded. “Was Mace drinking tonight?”

Jess shook her head. “No.”

“I was,” Grant said. “So was she and both of you. The alcohol. Brad ...” he smiled. “I think we found our poison.”

15. JULY 8th

He had slept wrong on his back. A slight turn to sit up sent a pain from Randy's lower back, across his hip to his thigh.

"You okay?" Sonya asked.

"Yeah." Randy nodded. "I'm fine." He looked around.

They had made it through the night.

And the night wasn't like the others. There was no thunder or lightning, just the electrical feel followed by a humming sound as the attack crafts hovered. They did so only twice.

After it was quiet for a while after the second time the crafts showed up, Randy and Sonya rested.

"How long have you been up?" Randy asked.

"Long enough."

He didn't know what she meant by that until she pointed. He turned around and painfully straightened his back. He realized that something had occurred in the town, something bigger than the night before.

The little basement window was nearly covered by thick vine-like branches like the ones over Bilks warehouse; they'd cracked the glass.

Apparently, those who had passed on in the building were feeding the growth.

"We have to get out of here." Randy said. "Gather your things."

"Do you have a gun?" she asked.

"What for? You can't shoot the vines."

"It's not the vines. It's what is beyond them that you need to shoot. Go on. Peek. I did."

Randy stepped over their box barricade and walked to the window. Like the wandering woman the day before, three or four people wandered about. Thick black fluid poured from their mouths.

"We have to try," Randy said. "You game."

"We have to figure a way to stay away from them or kill them," Sonya said. "Seriously, Randy, that stuff from their mouths shoots out. That's how they get us in the daytime."

"If we stay in here, it won't be long before we're grown in or those things come in. We have to try; the car's right outside the door." He held out his hand. "Let's do this."

After a deep breath, Sonya reluctantly agreed and took Randy's hand. They made it from the basement to the stairwell to the top of the stairs, and that was as far as they could get.

The body that once lay in the foyer had overgrown, blocking the way like a cage, but worse than that, two of those black-vomit wanderers stood just outside the door. Almost as if they were waiting for Randy and Sonya.

Randy grabbed his small radio from his pocket and turned it on. "Grant. Grant, are you there? Do you read? Come in. Please." He paused. "Grant. We have a problem."

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While Brad and his father were filled with gratefulness that Rita was alive and well, Jess couldn't shake the sadness over her friend's death. It overshadowed everything. Her thoughts wandered to her husband and children, and all that was going on in Finleyville became less her concern.

She knew what she had to do.

She had a bag of Rita's homemade granola for breakfast and packed a few extra bags in her duffle. She removed some items to make it lighter.

The Mason home could have been a wine and spirits store, that was how much liquor they had, and Jess found a bottle of brandy, dusty and dirty. She tucked that in her duffle bag as well. Her personal line of defense.

"Semi-good news," Brad said as he walked into the living room. "Miles Town didn't get it like we did. It seemed as if we were the target."

"That's because Miles Town didn't have a hoot and holler bonfire with the alien stuff."

"True. So.... Have to tell you, Jean made it safe to town and said your guy is doing better."

"That's good." Jess zipped her bag.

"How are you doing?" Brad asked. "Really."

"Not good. It was a reality check."

"Here's another reality check," Brad said. "Seems there are an awful lot of those carriers, the daylight sensors, as Mace called them."

"They're an easy elimination, just keep a distance. That guy I shot on the road, I suspect he was one. I just didn't know for sure. And I guess it's the alien way of getting us since I bet a lot of people hid last night."

"More than likely ... where you going?" Brad motioned to the duffle.

"Home." Jess faced him with folded arms. "If this world is dying, if we are getting picked off one by one, I want to be with my family when it happens. At least, I'll be able to feel like I'm protecting them."

"I see."

"Please don't try to talk me out of it."

Brad shook his head. "I wouldn't dream of it. I understand. I think it's dangerous. It's a hell of a long way to Oklahoma and a lot of ducking and hiding."

"I'll keep drinking," Jess said. "Hopefully your dad is right."

"Why don't I go with you? That way you won't be alone."

Jess smiled. "I can't do that; then you'd have to travel back here alone. No. Besides you'd be stoned the entire time, and it would drive me nuts."

"That's true. But I could sort of protect you."

Jess raised her eyebrow and looked at him.

"Okay, maybe not. But ... too bad I'm not Captain America, I'd give you my shield to protect you from that weapon."

Suddenly Jess' eyes widened. "That's it."

"Captain America?"

"No, the shield. The way to make it home." She smiled. "The most I'd have to leave it would be to get gas."

"What are you talking about?" Brad asked.

"A shield. A Fox. It's a smaller armored vehicle."

"Oh wow." Brad stepped back. "That could work."

"Yeah, it could. And the radio communications are really good; I probably for a good part of the trip could keep contact with your dad on the ham."

"Let us know what's going on out there?"

Jess nodded. "Is there a reserve base nearby? I'm positive I could get one there."

"Yeah, about forty miles east. Just off the new highway."

"Excellent, can you give me directions?"

"No." Brad shook his head. "I'll go with you there. That's the least I can do."

"You don't need to do that."

"No, I don't," Brad said. "But I want to."

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Brad tossed items into the back of his father's plumbing van.

"This thing is a good strong metal," Grant stated. "Should you run into problems, just duck in the back."

"I appreciate you letting me take the van," Brad said.

"The Fox is a good idea. She has the call numbers for the ham, right?" He waited for Brad to nod. "And as soon as you get on the new highway, radio me and let me know what it looks like out there."

"Will do."

Grant took a good long, hard look at Brad. "You're not coming back, are you?"

Brad hesitated before he answered. "Eventually. I can't let her go by herself, no matter how lame of protection I am, I'm company."

“I understand. I do.”

Rita’s ‘I don’t’ rang out. “You cannot go. She wants to leave this town, let her. She’s military, she can handle herself. Probably better than you can.”

Brad raised his eyebrow with a smile. “Thanks for the vote of confidence.”

“I’m serious, Brad. You’re my son.” Rota laid a hand on his cheek. “I am begging you with everything I have not to go.”

“I’ll be back.” He slid Rita’s hand from his face and held it. “You and Dad, you know, you raised me to be good. To do the right thing. What can I do in this town? The world is falling apart. Jess needs to find her children. I can’t ... I can’t let her make that trek alone. I can’t. Besides, I take after you. I drink too much for them to want me.”

“Now.” Rita said. “Until they start blowing things up.”

“Leave the boy alone, Rita. He’s gotta do what he feels is right,” Grant said. “Say your goodbyes. I do need you to stop through town and look for Cleat. Send him over to Randy’s place.”

Brad tilted his head. “What’s up?”

“He and Sonya are stuck in the building. The vines or whatever have overgrown and carriers are outside,” Grant said. “I’m pretty sure Cleat and his gang are in town. Spread the word about the alcohol, too.”

“I’ll do that. Maybe Jess and I will head to Randy’s.”

“If you’re up for it.”

Rita grunted. “Let’s just encourage him to put himself in every bit of danger there is.”

Brad smiled. “What else is there to do?”

“Stay hidden. Live.” Rita said.

“Got news for you. That’s not living, Ma.” Brad leaned into Rita and embraced her for a long time, then kissed her on the cheek. He turned to his father. “Where are you going?”

“Oh,” Grant waved out his hand. “I need to check Miles Town, and there are a couple people I know of in town without basements. I want to invite them over to be safe.”

“What!” Rita blasted. “You can’t do that. It’s insane!”

“No, my dear,” Grant patted her on the cheek. “It’s humane.”

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They had to retreat from the entranceway of the apartment building back down to the basement where there were fewer vines.

It not only smelled bad, it was hard to breathe. Almost as if the air was thick and sluggish. Each breath inspired felt like gel being inhaled, so much so that Randy had to cough like a man with emphysema. He first believed

maybe it was his lungs because he smoked, but Sonya wasn't a smoker, and she had just as much problem breathing.

Randy wished he paid more attention to science at some point in his life. He'd be able to logically figure out things. Instead, surprisingly, he relied on Sonya. Although, at times she was quite a ditz, she did come up with good theories.

This alien civilization was transforming their planet, and they were making it viable for them to breathe.

Apparently, their pulmonary system, Sonya guessed, had to be large.

"Air needs to be thin for us to breathe," Sonya said. "So if the air is thick, their airway passages must be large. Think how hard it is for us to breathe when the air is too thin. Plus, they have to be adding nutrients to the air for them as well. My ... imagine how big they are."

"How did you learn this stuff?" Randy asked.

"Boy Scouts with our boys."

Their boys.

In the basement, waiting for someone to come, hoping it wouldn't be too late, Randy watched Sonya going through other people's storage bins.

She found a whole box of trading cards and was thrilled.

"Randy Jr is going to love these," she said. "I'm taking them. I don't the person will care, do you?"

Randy shook his head.

"Randy, may I ask you something? Please be honest."

Randy knew what the question was going to be. He knew her too well. He had thought about it long and hard, digging deep into his gut for a feeling.

"Yes." Randy simply stated. "Yes."

"I didn't ask."

"You don't need to. You want to know if I think the boys are alive."

Sonya nodded. "And you do?"

"Yep. I think they aren't where they're supposed to be, like maybe hiding or in a camp. But my gut says they are alive."

"That's good to know. You always had that instinctive bond with them."

"Not like you. And I also think ..." Randy paused. "I think that we need to come up with a viable plan. Get the right things together, enough supplies, and first thing tomorrow, head on out to look."

The box of trading cards nearly toppled from Sonya's hands. "We. As in both of us?"

"Yeah, I was kind of an asshole for not even wanting to go yesterday. That's wrong. They're our boys. Our boys, Sonya. We'll find them together."

Sonya gushed, "Oh, Randy, thank you." She hurried to him, tossing her arms around his neck and embracing him.

Randy hesitated in returning the embrace, but just as he did, just as his hands pressed against her back, a series of gunshots caused them to jolt apart.

"It's coming from outside," Randy said, grabbing Sonya's hand and

bringing her to the window. "Wish we could see better."

The voices from outside shouted, "Where the hell are these people coming from?"

"They aren't from this town."

"Bet they were dropped in. They even real?"

"Don't know, they're just big fat ..." BANG. "Biological weapons to me."

A few more shots and someone else, a man yelled, "That's the last of them here. Got a group over on Montour. You three head up there, I'm gonna try to get these folks out of the jungle."

The sudden appearance of Brad's face peeking through the vines caused both Randy and Sonya to scream.

"Hey, Mr. Baker." Brad shouted. "We'll get you guys out real soon."

"Is that you shooting, Brad?" Randy asked.

"No. Not me. I can't shoot a cap gun. But it's Cleat Murphy and the guys."

"Listen," Randy spoke loudly. "These things are like concrete. It's not gonna be easy. I tried."

"They got a plan. It'll work. Right now, I have to get going. Every hour of daylight is important. Best of luck to you."

Then Brad disappeared.

Randy faced Sonya. "Best of luck to us?"

"Where's he going?"

"Who knows." Randy shrugged. "But we might as well have a seat. It may be awhile."

But it wasn't. Not at all. Maybe half an hour, and Cleat was able to free enough of the vines to get them through the basement window.

When Randy emerged, he looked back. The once green vines were black and ashy, almost as if they were dead.

"How?" Randy turned to Chad. "How did you do that? How'd you kill the plant?"

"Beer."

"I'm ... I'm sorry, did you say beer?"

Cleat nodded. "Seems Grant discovered that if a person drinks, those beings won't turn you into a carrier or into mush. So I just figured, if alcohol is poison to their eco system, try it directly. It worked. So after we sweep the town and clear out those carriers, and there's a lot, we'll start takin' down their forest."

"Is that smart?" Randy asked. "I mean, aren't you afraid they'll retaliate?"

"No." Cleat replied with a sense of calm. "I don't care if they do. I'll be out here fighting instead of hiding somewhere. Besides, I'll be good and lit so I probably won't even feel it coming."

Sonya smiled at Cleat. "That is a great attitude."

“It’s our world, right?” Cleat said. “Why shouldn’t we fight for it?”

“Good luck,” Randy extended his hand. “And thank you for getting us out of there.”

“No problem. And remember, we’ll be needing hands tomorrow if you wanna help take down their little trees and stuff.”

“I’ll let you know.” Randy laid a hand on Sonya’s back and walked her to the car.

“Randy,” Sonya paused before getting in. She looked at Cleat and the other men with her. They looked so determined, so on task. “Maybe we should help tomorrow. It’ll be something productive to do.”

“We’re leaving tomorrow, remember?”

“Yes, but we’ve waited this long. What’s one more day? Maybe if we help, it’ll make this place safer to come back to.”

“We’ll see.” Randy ushered her into the car. “Maybe we will. Right now, we need to get to Grant and Rita’s.” He closed the car door.

Sonya heard his words, and her eyes kept straying to Cleat. While some people would think what he was doing was dumb, possibly foolish, Sonya thought it was valiant.

A valiant effort even if it meant his death,

Right there, Sonya decided that if she were going to die anyhow, she wanted to at least do something worthwhile and valiant before she did.

16.

Highway 43 had only been open a few years. It took a decade to build. Brad remembered when they constructed the bridge that went high over Route 6. It was eerie. Way up there above everything. He used to wonder how many people would jump from that bridge to take their own lives.

The highway was a toll road; it never had heavy traffic. Getting to it wasn't easy; there were a lot of twists and turns from Finleyville.

It was a straight shot, no roadblocks or automobiles blocking their drive. Not because there were not any cars; there were plenty. But for some odd reason, all cars on the road had been moved to the side. Obviously, by the vine growth, there had one time been people in them.

The cars had been deliberately lined up in a neat pattern so the growth would eventually intertwine, and the cars would be nothing more than potted plants. They lined every foot of the highway they drove.

They'd cross that high bridge; Brad waited for that moment. It was the highest point in the valley, spanning between two large mountainous hills.

He knew they'd be able to see for miles, and when they arrived, he wished they hadn't.

They pulled over to take in the view.

The vines and growth had an odd, moldy grayish-green color, and from the bridge, they could see that color spreading like wildfire. It was everywhere.

The Lane County Park was just to their east; it still was a patch of green, along with the town of Finleyville. The tip of Bilks Farm was clear, and the tree circle around the town marked a fresh circle of Earth life around it.

Or perhaps a target.

"Take a mental picture, Brad," Jess said. "If we lose this war, our trees, our vision of the earth will be gone."

"It's already on its way," Brad stated. "Eventually this life form will strangle out our own eco system."

"And those of us who remain. We may not be able to live. It was hard to breathe near that apartment building. If Finleyville wants to live, they're gonna have to destroy those growths before it sucks up all the air."

"Then obviously Cleat Murphy is the right path. He'll be the town hero... again."

"Hmm." Jess grunted. "That sounded a little resentful. Don't like Cleat much."

"No, he's alright. I mean, he's Cleat. Town football star, baseball star.

Eagle Scout. War hero ... alcoholic, womanizer, and everyone's pal." Brad snickered. "Was always nice though, just didn't really talk to the likes of me."

"Maybe you spent your high school years too stoned to care enough to talk to him."

"Maybe." Brad sighed and looked out. "I'm gonna radio my father. Tell him that ... shit ..." he pointed. "North. Look. Is that one of those storms starting?"

"Hard to tell in the daytime, but ..." Jess paused. "I see the craft. It is. Radio him. I'll move the van closer to the other cars for cover."

Brad murmured, "Good idea," then eyes transfixed on the dot in the sky, he lifted the radio.

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Rita looked far from happy, standing in her living room with arms crossed tightly to her body. Her foot tapped in irritation as the eighth and ninth person entered her home.

"Just find a spot for your stuff. We'll organize later. You can always go home for more." Grant instructed.

"Thank you for this, Grant," Emily Pierce told him as she walked in with her nine-year-old son. A woman in her late twenties, small stature, with no nonsense short brown hair, she said, "I didn't know what we'd do. We lucked out in our trailer under the bed, but for how long?"

"You're good here. Hopefully, we only have to go below sporadically."

"Well, we brought all the food I had." Emily said.

"We appreciate it."

It was then that Grant noticed Rita and her inhospitable glare. He walked to her. "Knock it off. I invited these folks to be safe."

"I hope they brought their own alcohol supply, because I'm not sharing."

"What is wrong with you?" Grant asked. "You are especially nasty. Go have a drink."

"I already did."

"Then have another."

"Mr. Mason?" Jan Murphy, Cleat's wife, called from the kitchen. "Brad's on the radio calling for you."

Rita whispered, "What's she doing in my kitchen?"

"People brought food; she's probably putting it away." Grant brushed by Rita and walked into the kitchen. Sure enough, Brad was calling over and over. Grant lifted the radio. "Yeah, Brad."

"Hey, Dad, thank God. We're on the mile high bridge. Something is coming your way. A ship and something else."

"What do you mean?" Grant asked.

“I don’t know. We thought it was the normal thing, but this is blue and like a wall, rolling your way.”

“We’ll get below. Get cover. Now.”

“We’re good. Radio back when all is clear,” said Brad.

“Will do.” Grant ended the radio call, turned to Jan, and requested that she hurry people to the basement with instructions to be quiet. Something was coming. Then Grant picked up the radio again. Randy hadn’t arrived. Neither had Cleat, and he had to get a hold of them both.

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Randy’s apartment building was on the outskirts of Finleyville; to get to the heart of town it was a three mile drive down the winding section of Route 6.

They received the radio call from Grant to hightail it there or get cover. However, they were already on the road. They were moving good and the only option was to go forward.

“We’ll make it, right?” Sonya asked, peering out to the windshield. “I don’t see anything.”

“Neither do I. We’ll make it.”

“Thank you for taking such good care of me, Randy.”

“Don’t thank me yet.” Randy smiled. “Look, Bilks Farm. Little further and we’ll ...”

Whoosh!

Less than a mile before Finleyville, just as they drove by Bilks, a huge surge, as if an electric ball, slammed into the car from behind.

It crackled and snapped. Randy felt the electricity sear through him, tingling his skin as if he’d put his finger in a socket.

“Oh God.” Sonya gasped for breath and wheezed loudly, her head going back.

Not only did the pulse of electricity cause all loss of power in the vehicle, it propelled them at a high speed into the air, flipping the car and rolling over the side of the road.

After several rolls, the car landed upright with a hard jolt.

Randy wasn’t injured, and that surprised him. Maybe he was but the adrenaline was rushing. He heard Sonya wheeze, and he looked over at her.

In the seat, hands flat to her side; Sonya stared out, her body shaking. “Ran ... Randy.”

“Are you hurt? What hurts?” Randy asked.

“Noth ... nothing.” Her breaths were shallow, and her chest moved dramatically up and down.

“I’ll get you out; you’re in shock.” Randy reached for her seat.

“No ... no ... something ... something is wrong. Can’t move. Barely breathe.”

“You’ll be fine.” Randy grunted; the seat belt was jammed.

“I feel pulled.” She whimpered. “I feel pulled.” Her voice took on a high, fear-laced tone. “Find our boys. Find them.”

“I’ll get you out of here.” Randy reached down and popped the trunk. “I’ll cut you out.”

“Ran ... Randy?” Sonya only shifted her eyes; her head didn’t move. “I’m sorry for everything I did to you. I’m ... I’m so sorry.”

He saw the tear roll down her cheek. “You’ll be fine. Stop. Calm down.” He pushed open his door, tripping over a tree branch and landing on his knees. He stood, walked around the back of his car, and grabbed his toolbox. He had wire cutters, that was all; they would have to do. With them in his grip, he walked to Sonya’s door. “Okay, I’ll ...”

Gone.

He opened the door, and Sonya was gone.

Not a trace. No blood. In fact, the seatbelt was still secured. However, there was no sign of Sonya anywhere.

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Jan gasped out in desperation, handing the radio to Grant. “He’s not answering.”

Grant cupped her hand, taking the radio. “Cleet is resourceful. He knows you’re here safe; he’s probably somewhere safe.”

Jan gave a sad smile. “You know as well as I do, he’s probably standing in the street firing his gun.”

“Was he drinking?”

“Always.”

“We’re good.” Grant tried to comfort her. “Now go below. Go on. Rita and I will be right there.”

Jan nodded and slipped away.

In the kitchen, Grant watch Rita put more supplies in a box. “That’s enough, Rita. Get below. It can’t be much longer. You can feel the air.”

“Just a few more items. We have a lot of people down there.”

“We have things down there.”

“I know. I want to be sure.” Rita said. “Don’t need anyone coming up here and drawing attention.”

At that second, the back door flew open in a rush.

Rita sighed out. “Randy, thank God. You made it. We were worried.”

Grant saw that Randy had blood on his face; he was red and disheveled. “Where’s Sonya?”

“She’s gone. She’s gone.” Randy said with panic.

Rita’s hand shot to her mouth. “Oh, God. That poor thing. When? Where? Brad said you guys were fine.”

“How did it happen?” Grant asked. “I thought for sure you got the message to drink. Didn’t it work?”

Randy shook her head. “She’s not dead. She wasn’t killed. She’s ... she’s gone. I can’t stay. I’m looking for Cleat. He’ll help me find her.”

“Wait.” Grant held up his hand. “What do you mean gone? Did she go looking for the boys?”

“No. We were driving here. Some sort of pulse hit us around Bilks. We lost all power to the car. Sent us flying off the road, the car rolled down the hill. She was ... she was stuck. Said she couldn’t move.” Randy wiped the sweat off his brow. “I couldn’t free her. So I got out of the car to cut her out and when I opened her door, she was gone.”

“She vanished?” Grant asked. “Maybe she got out and ran in a state of shock.”

“That’s possible. I looked and I have to keep on looking.” Randy turned. “I just need help.”

Grant stopped him. “I’ll help you. But right now, get below. You aren’t going to do her any good if something happens to you. Go below.”

Randy hesitated. It was apparent how upset he was. He only gave a nod and headed to the basement.

Just as Rita and Grant started to follow, there was a knock at the door.

“Maybe that’s Sonya,” Grant suggested.

Rita peeked around. “No. It’s not. It’s Shelly from two doors up. Don’t let her in. She has that colicky baby.”

“I’ll handle it. Go.” Grant urged her down below, pulled the basement door closed and walked to the front.

He saw Shelly holding the infant, and he opened the door. “Shelly.”

“Please help us, Mr. Mason. Please,” She pleaded. “We don’t have a basement. No one else will let us in. They’re coming. I can feel the energy.”

“Shelly,” Grant spoke reasonably. “The baby ... quiet is our best defense. If she makes a noise, we’re all done for.”

“She won’t. I promise.”

Grant closed his eyes. He was torn on what to do. He stared at the little baby’s face, so pure and innocent. How the child had survived when most children were gone was simply just a miracle.

“Help her. If not me, take her. Please.” Shelly begged. “She’s just a baby.”

Grant knew what it meant, knew the chance he would take by letting the child in. One cry, one whimper would let them know they were hiding. But it was a child, a baby, and Grant opened the door wider.

Randy sat on a crate, his face buried in his hands.

“What’s taking so long for them to get here?” Jan paced rubbing her arms. “Is it me? Or is this taking too long?”

“Not you,” Rita said. “Usually they pass by really fast. We got the warning a while ago.”

Emily suggested. “Hopefully they aren’t coming.”

Randy dragged his fingers over his face as he lifted his head. “Maybe they’re doing things differently. Maybe they’re being more thorough. House to house instead of just a ...”

When he stopped speaking, everyone noticed that his eyes had shifted elsewhere.

Rita paced as well, using an old baseball bat as some sort of security blanket. She looked to the stairs. Grant came down with Shelly behind him. “You let her in?” she asked with a snap. “You idiot. Why?”

Grant winced “What was I supposed to do? Let her die out there?”

“Yes.” Rita replied. “Better her than us down here. If they are being more thorough and really looking, then the second that baby cries, we’re all done for.”

Shelly cradled her baby. “She won’t.”

Randy stood. “Maybe she won’t cry. How long does she have to be quiet? Not long.”

“Let me tell you something. One cry, one sound. If I have to ...” Rita said. “I’ll silence that baby myself.”

“Rita!” Grant blasted. “What in God’s name is wrong with you?”

“No, Grant, what’s wrong with you?” Rita retorted. “Look around. You brought these people into our home to be safe. Look at them, Grant. Three of them are children, children who know to be quiet. You wanna risk their lives, all of our lives, on one baby? Why didn’t she go somewhere else? Huh? Why here? I’ll tell you. No one will let her in. That baby cries all the time.”

Grant held up his hand. “She’s still alive. We’ve had many sweeps, so that ought to tell you something.”

Randy tried to reason. “It’ll be fine. We just need to be calm or the baby will start ...”

“Shh.” Grant silenced them. “They’re arriving.”

Nearly everyone looked to his or her arms, watching the hair stand on edge as the electricity in the air built.

Emily huddled with her child, Jan with her kids, pulling them close.

No one made a sound.

No one took a breath.

The humming of the approaching craft was the only noise until ...

The baby’s whimper broke the silence.

It sent more of a shock through the air than any alien force.

Silence drew in again but not for long as the humming grew closer and the infant began the prelude to a wail.

Grant hushed Shelly. "Keep her quiet."

"I'm trying." Shelly bounced the bay.

Rita suggested. "Give her a bottle."

"I ... I didn't bring one."

"Oh my God."

Randy stepped forward. "She feels your tenseness. Relax."

The baby choked out a small cry.

"Quiet her." Rita whispered with edge.

Randy reached out. "Give me the baby."

Shelly pulled back.

The electrical hum was near, loud, and then the baby cried.

"Shut her up." Rita ordered.

"Give me the baby." Randy requested.

Shelly pulled back, holding the baby to the chest,

Grant shuddered. "Please."

Within a second, the baby let loose, screaming out a cry that vibrated through the basement.

Grant's head lowered. "We're done."

Randy didn't hesitate, he stepped forward, snatched the baby from Shelly's arms and in one swift move charged up the steps and out of the basement.

Shelly, whether she cared or just didn't think, screamed out a hysterical, "No!" and moved for the steps, continuously screaming as she did.

But it didn't last long; with a 'thump', Shelly was quiet. Her limp body fell to the floor after Jan struck her with Rita's baseball bat.

Jan closed her eyes and backed up to her children, bringing them close to her and against the wall of the basement.

Grant looked down at Shelly, nudging her with his foot. She moved; she was still alive. He then concerned himself with what was above and, more so, to the distant baby's cry.

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Randy wasn't really thinking about his own safety. He saw the face of Jan's children, the little boy that was there with the other woman and knew if the baby didn't stop crying, they were all goners.

What did he have to lose? His life? Better him than them, and that was the reason he took the baby.

He rushed to the dining room, grabbed a bottle of vodka from the bar,

and then he and the baby hid in the dining room closet.

The child still cried loudly. Uncapping the bottle, Randy downed a huge drink, put some on the baby's head, then really having no choice, poured a few drops of vodka in his hand and dribbled it into the baby's mouth.

He knew it was bad and the baby could get sick, but what was the alternative? It was the lesser of the evils.

But the infant still cried. Despite the fact that Randy held her tight, she cried.

"Please let Grant be right. Please let alcohol be the deterrent," he begged in his mind, and as the hair on his arms really stood on edge, the white light seeped under the door.

He closed his eyes tightly as the baby screamed, pressing his lips to her head. The door to the closet burst into splinters, and Randy lifted his eyes.

He saw nothing beyond that closet door. A huge white electrical light swirled before him. It carried an odd vinegar smell. As the light made its way into the closet, Randy closed his eyes again.

17.

The remaining trip to the reserve base was uneventful, and they cruised there at a good speed.

Maybe Jess was expecting all to be fine. In her mind, she envisioned troops waiting to go to battle, maybe a heavily guarded area. What she didn't expect to see was the area completely flattened.

What probably was a perimeter fence was shredded. The buildings were mere rubble, and the artillery vehicles were tossed about like matchbox cars.

There wasn't a body in sight, and the odd plant life was just starting to grow.

The base had been hit. Differently, too, than they had seen before.

Not only did her shoulders drop, but her hopes as well. "This was not what I expected," She said.

"I'm sorry."

"Where is everyone, Brad?" she asked. "Really. I mean we haven't seen a soul since leaving Finleyville. Think about it. We passed through Reed, too and only that Randy guy and his wife were alive. Where is everyone?"

"I think we know the answer to that one," Brad replied.

"That fast?" she questioned. "A few days? That fast?"

"Not that I'm like a huge history buff or anything, but there were a lot of battles. A lot of invasions that did their work in a day or two. This is not inconceivable. But we don't know what's going on outside of this area."

Jess tossed out her hand. "And now, we won't know."

"Why's that?" Brad asked. "We have the van. Let's go search out your family. We even passed that gas station, which wasn't overgrown yet. Let's go."

Jess shook her head. "I can't ask that of you."

"You're not. I'm making the suggestion. Besides, I want to know what's going on. I need to know."

Jess wanted him to go, she really did. She was a strong woman whose defenses were slowly crumbling with each passing day. She didn't need Brad's protection; she needed his company, his support.

"You didn't say anything," Brad stated. "I'll take that as a yes."

"Are you going to continue to smoke your weed?"

"Yes."

She shook her head with a smile. "Thank you."

"Oh, sure, I'll smoke it anytime for you."

She chuckled. "That's not what I meant but ..." With a sigh, she looked

about. "Let's see what we can salvage and then head out."

Waiting for Brad's agreement, Jess walked farther into the destruction of the reserve base. She wasn't sure what they'd find, if anything, but it was worth a shot, maybe even it would lead to answers as to what had occurred there.

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He sat on the floor of that closet for the longest time. Randy had had come to grips with the fact that he was going to die. He accepted that, and in the few short seconds, he reconciled his life and all that he had done, right and wrong. His sons, Sonya, work ...

The light crept up, engulfing him and the child, and then the light withdrew.

Neither he nor the baby was hurt.

Grant's alcohol defense worked.

And on the floor of that closet, out of gratefulness, fear, loss, and lack of control over all that was happening, Randy lost it.

He sobbed.

Until Grant stood at the closet door.

He was the first to emerge from the basement and did so alone, Randy supposed, to make sure everything was over and fine. Grant looked more than surprised to find Randy and the baby alive. It wasn't long, after the child cried again, that Shelly emerged, snatching her child from Randy's grip and fleeing the home,

She angrily said nothing.

Grant told Randy that Shelly was mad, how Jan had to knock her out when she freaked out.

Then Grant thanked Randy.

"For what?" Randy asked.

"Look at this closet," Grant said. "You think the basement door would have stopped them from getting us? No. You took the baby and saved our lives."

Randy wanted to tell Grant to retract that statement. He wasn't a hero and didn't deserve any thanks. Even if his actions did stop harm from coming to those in the basement, Randy still took the baby from her mother's arms knowing full well that the baby, more than likely, would die.

He sacrificed that infant, and that alone overshadowed anything else he did.

Sheer luck stopped that from occurring.

Randy was having a hard time dealing with everything, his recent actions, and more so the fact that Sonya was gone.

He didn't stop to take time to talk or listen to the others; in fact he excused himself from the Mason home. Randy needed air and needed to get out. More so, he needed to look for Sonya. Even if his search was futile, for him, for her, and their sons, he had to look and keep on looking.

18. JULY 9th

Grant was at his wits' end. Randy over the course of the previous day was barely at the house. He stopped by to sleep on one of the cots in the basement. How he was surviving when two sweeps had occurred was beyond Grant.

Drunk constantly.

He expected Randy to go look for his sons, but Randy stayed focused on looking for Sonya.

No remains, no trace. Gone.

Grant was fearful that perhaps that was what happened to Miles Town. Radio communications had ceased. In fact, Grant couldn't reach anyone on the radio at all.

Dead air.

There were nine people, other than Randy, that Grant and Rita brought into their home. None of them said much; they just lingered in the sadness of all that was happening.

He hadn't heard from Brad since a broken up transmission stating they were heading to find Jess' family.

Rita was beside herself, drinking more than normal, using survival as an excuse to stay drunk.

In the morning, Grant had gone over to check on Shelly and the baby. Shelly simply told him the baby was gone. That she disappeared from her cradle.

A part of Grant thought that maybe Shelly killed the child. But then, he thought of Sonya and Cleat and others who simply disappeared.

It was another worry to carry. Being turned into fertilizer for their plants was easily halted just by drinking alcohol. But drinking, or not, didn't help those who simply vanished.

Were they disintegrated or gone? Grant didn't know, and it added all the more reason for them all to just stay hidden, alive.

But the lack of communication with Miles Town bothered him. They were too close not to be trying to contact Finleyville.

So before he went below for the long haul, Grant decided he would ride to Miles Town. See for himself what all was going on.

In the moments before she was gone, Sonya talked about helping Cleat. Just to do something to make a difference.

And after he realized he wasn't finding his wife or Cleat, Randy decided to do just that.

Everyone though he was just searching; instead, he made it to the beer distributor on Bethlehem Road and loaded a truck with every keg and case of beer that they had.

Ironically, when all the other stores were overgrown with vines and trees, the beer store was untouched.

He and a few others worked constantly. It didn't take much beer, or even long for the beer to take effect.

For as fast as the vines grew, they died faster.

They wilted and weakened immediately, turning an ashy color. Within hours, they crumbled.

Half a day later, they were gone, and the building was clear.

Bilks Warehouse was the hardest to clear and used up the rest of their supplies, but it worked. By the time the vines and trees were cleared enough for Randy to get into the warehouse, he went in. He had to see.

All that remained inside were they tarps they used to cover the bodies. The warehouse was no longer structurally sound. In fact, none of buildings that were encompassed was sound.

They looked as if a demolition had begun.

They had finished; it was the second day of work they put into killing the plant life.

Randy was going to rest and start again in the morning. He estimated they were seventy percent complete.

On his way back to Grant's, he saw Grant drive past. He was heading in the direction of Miles Town.

Randy decided to follow.

But on the road, just as they left Finleyville, Grant stopped.

A line of cars headed away from Miles town. There were at least two dozen.

Grant stepped from his vehicle, and so did Randy. When they did, the first of the cars halted, and the driver stepped out.

"Where you folks coming from?" Grant asked.

"Miles." The man answered. "We needed a place to go."

Randy stepped into the conversation as he stood next to Grant. "Why do you need a place to go? What happened in Miles Town?"

"We were hit relentlessly for two days. Buildings destroyed, like blasted apart without fire. It was bad. We're ... we are all that remain."

19. JULY 10th.

They exhausted the last of the gas seventeen miles from Jess' hometown and had to walk the rest of the way.

Brad knew they were fortunate finding gas. The problem they faced most was breathing.

The air was too thick to inhale, and Jess had the keen insight to make it a point to find oxygen tanks. One day into their journey, they had to start using them.

Brad expected to have to hide and duck, to be quiet, maybe even run, but none of that happened. It was a vacant, lonely world, not a soul in sight. It was as if the invaders had decided they'd done enough and moved on.

They ceased seeing ships the farther they went.

But there was one thing they did see, an overabundance of those trees. The alien foliage was impressive, and not in a good way.

In a day, they had vines, by day two trees were spouting. Four days later forests of the stuff were everywhere, and that was the main reason for the lack of oxygen.

Brad was left to wonder if all that occurred in less than a week, what the world would look like in a month.

They wore portable oxygen units as they approached the main street of Jess's town, or at least, what used to be the main street.

Only here and there could they see a brick or a building. Cars were buried beneath the new growth. Only miniscule hints of the town remained.

Brad could tell by her face that Jess was thinking the same as him.

"Where to next?" Brad asked. "I mean, after we find your family."

Jess just looked at him. "I'm not holding high hopes."

"You okay?" Brad asked.

"No. Not at all. I just want to die."

"Well, don't do that. Okay? 'Cause right now, I don't feel like being alone. Don't give up yet."

Jess stopped walking. "My street." She whimpered and shook her head. It didn't look like a street at all. The trees had intertwined and created a cave-like entrance.

"Why don't you wait here," she suggested. "My house is the first house, and I'd like to do this alone."

"I understand." Brad handed her a bottle of beer from his backpack. "Good luck."

Jess nodded and walked through the hollow opening.

Brad waited. He wouldn't wait for long, but she needed her privacy. If her family had succumbed, he knew what she'd find.

The house would be over grown, and the primary starting points would be obvious. Brad had seen what became of the remains many times as they travelled together. The body, or rather remains, became a hard shelled root.

He waited five or ten minutes. Around the fifteen-minute mark, Brad decided to find her. He hoped she didn't take her own life; Brad feared that.

He was prepared to find her crying; it was her family. The 'right' things to say raced through his mind as he approached the first house.

The foliage on the door had been killed, and the front door of the home was open.

He stepped up the walk and to the door. "Jess. Hey, Jess. You okay?"

No reply.

Brad went in.

He kept calling out her name. It was a one-floor home so he began his search. "Jess!" He called stronger and with more worry.

Then his oxygen unit beeped.

He was nearly out of air.

"Shit." He tapped the dial hoping it was wrong. It wasn't. "Jess, I'll be back. I have to refuel."

A sick knot formed in his stomach; Brad was more worried than he had been. It didn't feel right; something was wrong.

He stepped out of the house and heard the noise.

It was a voice, deep, with a clicking sound to it.

Slowly, Brad turned his head.

He saw a figure; it was large and appeared cloaked within the vines.

His heart raced, and then Brad took off. Whatever it was, it needed only two stomping steps to reach him.

A huge grip came down to his shoulder, and Brad, wiry, shrugged away.

But the grip snatched away his oxygen.

Brad couldn't breathe.

He was in a world without air. He felt his lungs folding, getting heavy. He could see the light just ahead and knew he had more oxygen there.

The moment he stepped out of the cave, another figure stopped him. This one wore a suit, which clung tight to a very large human-like figure.

His last vision. The last thing he would see, Brad thought. And just as he felt the final drop of life leave him, something dropped over him. A clear, tube-like cylinder surrounded him.

It hissed as it sealed, and Brad was trapped.

Within seconds, it filled with a white powdery mist and oddly enough as it fell around him, Brad was able to breathe.

The white substance was fine and dusted him like talcum.

His encasement shifted and shot upward at a high speed. Rocking back and forth inside, Brad tried to hold onto the walls for some sort of support. He

braced himself with palms flush to the walls.

As he lifted high in the sky, he saw the earth below him. His heart instantaneously broke. It wasn't his earth. His world. His life.

The brightness of the sun left, and Brad's encasement moved into something.

It was dark. Unable to see, Brad shifted around, and then the tube stopped.

He heaved a few breaths, pulled his hands from the walls, and the moment he did the floor dropped out and Brad fell down.

He landed with a hard thump in a dimly lit room onto what felt like a metal floor.

Catching his bearings, Brad shook his head once like a disoriented cat and lifted his head. A hand extended to him.

A human hand.

He looked at it, following it up.

Jess.

"Rough ride," she said helping him to stand. "Look who's here." She motioned her head down.

Behind her left leg was something Brad never expected to see again.

Spunky.

The dog.

"Dude." Brad laughed. "You're alive."

Spunky tilted his head at Brad's reached hand.

"He's still weird." Brad looked around. The room wasn't cell-like or dirty. It was plain, grey, and clean.

It also was very large.

As he looked around, he saw all the people there. So many. Too many.

"What *is* this place?" Brad asked. "Are we on a ship?"

"I just got here, too."

"Brad!" His name was called.

Brad searched out at the call of his name. "Clead?"

Clead rushed over. "Oh man. They got you too. Do you know if my wife is okay? My kids?"

"I wasn't with her." Brad pointed. "I'm sorry."

"No, that's okay."

Jess asked. "What is this place?"

"A holding center. That's what we guess. I mean, they feed us. But we can't understand them."

Brad was shocked. "You've seen them. I saw one but it was wearing a spacesuit."

"Yeah, they're a lot like us only a lot bigger. Different color, almost pink and they don't have any hair. Eyes are ... well ... they're alien." Clead shrugged. "They always try to talk, but none of us understand them."

"Why would they hold us here?" Brad asked.

Cleat shrugged again. “They have taken some people from here. But those people haven’t come back.”

“Why?” Brad asked. “I mean, why take survivors?”

“Simple. We’re not survivors to them.” Jess answered. “We’re specimens.”

20. SEPTEMBER 30th

What had they become?

Mere shells of people, living like moles, scurrying out and then back in.

Those in his shelter, those who remained, were quiet so much; he wondered if anyone really knew how to have a conversation anymore.

Emily and her son had left, along with three other people. In fact, they left weeks after coming into the shelter.

They were never heard from again.

Many who left Finleyville either didn't make it far or were never seen again.

Randy supposed it was their way of giving up. Tired of hiding, living like animals, fearful. Death was a welcome thing, a thought Randy had daily.

Leaving the shelter and just going was on his mind since he went to Roy's that one day in August. He looked at the board of news, about how Bilks would open its greenhouse. Several people posted that the streets were so overgrown that they couldn't leave.

Someone even posted that he heard buzzing-like construction sounds.

Randy dismissed that. They probably were all crazy now.

They weren't healthy, that was for sure. Everyone was pale and thin from lack of sun and proper nourishment.

There was some hope that it was over when the sweeps stopped for over a week, but then they picked up in frequency. The odd thing was no more people disappeared or died. Well, they did, only if they left Finleyville.

In fact, after Randy and the other men killed off the plant growth, nothing else ever grew.

If it wasn't for the clockwork sweeps of ships, Randy would swear Finleyville was forgotten by the terraforming civilization.

He looked at the date and got sick to his stomach. Not only had it been two whole months since everything began, it was his and Sonya's anniversary.

He thought about her a lot. He thought about their sons.

And then Randy knew, just as he'd been hopeful to start his new life twenty-five years earlier with Sonya, that he'd made the decision to start a new life again on this day.

It was time to leave.

During the time they spent in the basement, they had sectioned off the area for privacy, but there was still one common area by the stairs; it was

there they ate their meals.

Sharing crackers and canned beef with gravy, they had quiet conversation using whiteboards.

Randy lifted his, then stood.

Grant began to write, then stopped. "What are you doing?"

"Like my board said, I'm leaving, I'm going. I can't do this anymore. I really can't. We never speak because we're afraid that at any given time they'll hear us. It's not life, Grant."

Rita stood. "My son said the same thing."

"Bet no matter where he is, he's happier."

Grant nodded. "I understand what you're doing."

"I also have to know what happened to this world. We've been pretty much been left alone for months. Is it over? Are we just stuck? We'll never know unless we go. If I can get back, I will, if not ... well."

"Make sure you take supplies in a sack," Grant told him.

"Thank you. I'm gonna go while I have the nerve and it's still the middle of the day."

Rita scurried to get him some items; she placed them in a small backpack, and Randy made his round of goodbyes.

He embraced them all, thanking them for the last several months, and then he moved to the stairs.

"Wait," Grant called out. "I thought about leaving too, and I think I know a way out of town that will keep you off the streets and out of sight. No one's taken it yet. Not that I know of."

Randy listened to Grant's instructions.

Just over the hillside from Grant's house, where the end of the road met the end of Bilks' property, was the old spillway. A concrete tube covered by crates was the entrance to a long sewer-like tunnel that cut under the edge of Finleyville and opened at Lawson's creek just on the other side of Reed. It was three miles long, and Grant couldn't say whether or not it was clear all the way through, but it was worth a shot.

Randy had to hunch most of the way as he walked through the old sewer system. Vines, real vines, cut through like spider webs.

There was no water or moisture nor any of that white powder that kept appearing.

He walked for what seemed forever, and then Randy finally saw the sun, a small speck of light signifying that the end of the tunnel was near.

But something was wrong. Just as he could see the end, just as he saw his escape, Randy had a hard time breathing.

At first, he believed he was having a heart attack, and then he realized what it was.

He debated on stopping, back tracking, but then he decided against that.

He was almost there, almost out.

With each step, breathing became more difficult, and the second he emerged into a world he did not even recognize, all the air around him vanished. It was so thick that it might as not be there.

He held what little breath he had, trying not to inhale while he took in the final view of his life.

The new world. The new civilization.

He was in a forest of some kind, completely overgrown. Where there should have been a creek, there was nothing.

That was it. His look was done.

He realized the others met the same fate, emerged to air too thick to inhale.

Others made the same decision as he did.

It was a good day to die.

His chest felt as if it were crushing and his head swam.

He was seconds from passing out, and he knew it.

He took another step and immediately heard what sounded like an alarm, but not a tone he had ever heard. He looked around and up and down; upon him came a plastic cage.

Round, tube like, it sealed him inside, hissed as it shut and blasted him with that white dust.

The same white dust that was all over Finleyville.

It subsided and settled at his feet, and immediately Randy was able to breathe.

He reached down and lifted some.

That's what it was. It wasn't debris; it wasn't a means to pull them out or an irritant. The white dust was a means so those in Finleyville could breathe. It thinned the air or something like that. They were dropping it on purpose.

But why?

The moment the cage lifted from the ground, Randy began to get answers he wasn't ready for.

It moved slowly, and Randy looked up through the clear ceiling.

He was hoisted by a craft, small and airplane-like, but like none he'd ever seen. It lifted him above the tall new trees, and Randy saw below as they flew toward Finleyville...

Crafts like the one that had him flew over Finleyville. They weren't doing sweeps; in fact one was hovered over Stork's store, appearing as if it were leaving supplies.

Then Randy saw the reason for the white powder. They were intentionally keeping them alive.

There was no way he would have seen it from town, especially since he was underground, and when he wasn't, he only focused on his destination.

It was no less than a huge fence made of glass of some sort of clear material. It started in Reed and appeared to encircle an area. How far or how

big the circumference was, Randy couldn't determine.

He sailed over it quickly, but not fast enough that he didn't see the beings below him, the civilization that had moved right in. They stood by the glass wall, some were big, some little, like children. They pointed into the wall; what were they pointing at?

He did see as he flew over the tip of the wall there were monitors, almost like flat screen clear monitors. The beings flipped their hands over them. Were they viewing pictures of humans?

Randy's heart raced, and he realized they no longer needed to hide below.

Especially when he saw a craft flying over Finleyville. One hovered over Stork's market dropping off supplies. The crafts weren't looking to kill the people of Finleyville, they were keeping them alive.

As everything registered, the cage lowered to the ground and the floor dropped out, sending Randy out into the main street.

He lifted himself from the ground, watched the craft fly off, and then he ran straight to Grant's house.

"Grant!" he shouted as he ran inside and then down the stairs.

"Randy. What the hell?" Grant whispered. "They're out there."

"Yeah, but they aren't killing us." Randy breathed heavily. "I saw. I saw why we're still alive, and there's more in Reed. We have to go." He spoke rushed.

Grant reached up stopping him. "What did you see?"

Randy didn't say anything; he just flew up the stairs.

For safety's sake, Grant and Randy left the others behind. But Randy was sure. He was very sure that they didn't need to hide; in fact, he was willing to bet the aliens wanted them out and about.

They left Finleyville, and just before they hit the small bridge to Reed, they had to stop because the road stopped.

A huge new forest stood, but it wasn't alien growth, they were oak trees, apple trees, and many others.

Grant stepped out of the car. "Were these put here?"

"Yeah." Randy waved him to follow.

"Randy, wait." Grant called chasing Randy as he ran.

When they emerged from the trees, it was as if they emerged into the Twilight Zone.

A teenager on a bike rode by them; cars were parked on the streets. People walked about.

"They watched us for years. Decades," Randy said. "This is what they

think we are. How we live.”

It was a newly-constructed town, constructed to look no less than something from a 1950s television show. The trees lined sidewalks. Women wore dresses, hats, and their hair was done. Men wore suits, and kids dressed in plaid.

Randy laughed. It was emotional. “This is unreal.”

They walked down the perfect street. Two men sat outside a barbershop and waved.

Grant looked left to right as he walked backwards. He could see little houses on the hill with white picket fences.

But the street didn’t go for long.

Just before they reached the end of the line, Randy spotted her.

She wore the prettiest flowered dress, and her hair was plastered in a bob-like cut.

“Randy, darling, is that you?” Sonya walked quickly to him. “My goodness, I have been waiting. Look at you boys.” She smiled and darted a kiss to his cheek and patted Grant’s chest. “Don’t you look the worst for wear? Go get cleaned up. I’ll have supper on the table at six. I just have to finish errands.”

She turned her head, and that was when Randy saw it. The small, healing scar on her left temple. They had done something to her.

“Randy Junior!” Sonya snapped her gloved fingers, and a little boy with perfectly combed hair and a striped shirt ran over.

“Yes, mamma.”

“Father’s finally back. Go to the store and get him his Lucky Strikes, will you. So he has them at home. He works so hard.”

Randy stared at the boy. He looked remarkably like his own son did at that age.

The boy said ‘yes’ to Sonya and darted away.

“See you at home, sweetheart.” Sonya smiled and walked away.

Grant’s eyes widened. “What in God’s name?”

“Dad!” Brad called out.

Grant turned slowly. Brad was walking down the street with Jess. She wore a dress, pushed a baby stroller, and a little dog walked next to them.

“Don’t forget. Bowling tonight. Cleat and his father. We have a five dollar bill riding on this one.” Brad gave a thumbs up to Grant as he continued on his walk.

Slowly Grant returned the thumbs up and looked at Randy. “Are we dead?”

“No.” Randy, speaking in a somewhat shocked tone, turned Grant to see the end of the street.

Grant jolted, nearly toppling back when he saw it.

The wall, the clear fence, was the end of the street, and many alien beings watched the happenings inside. In fact, they looked a lot like families

visiting a museum or zoo.

“We’re an endangered species,” Randy explained. “That’s what I figure. The last of this world’s kind. Sort of a wildlife preserve. We don’t need to hide. We need to come up. It’s done. We know longer have to worry about dying. So, no, we aren’t dead.”

“No. No, we aren’t.” Grant shook his head. “We’re just on exhibition.”

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The End

Please check out the short film, CRY on youtube

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Evj_OcJaYZo